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DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

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PHOTO: PTI

Students can now opt for board exams twice a year

RAIPUR, 20 FEB

Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan has said students will get an option of appearing for 10th and 12th class board examinations twice a year from the academic session 2025-26. One of the objectives of the new National Education Policy (NEP), unveiled in 2020, is to reduce the academic stress on students, Pradhan said on Monday after launching the PM SHRI (Prime Minister Schools for Rising India) scheme in Chhattisgarh under which 211 schools of the state will be upgraded on a 'hub and spoke' model by spending Rs 2 crore on each of them. Highlighting the concept of introducing 10 bag-less days in school every year, the minister stressed engaging students with art, culture, and sports, among other activities. According to the New Curriculum Framework (NCF) announced by Ministry of Education in August 2023, board examinations will be held at least twice a year.
—PTI

HC: Surprising that Sandeshkhali's main accused not held

KOLKATA, 20 FEB

The Calcutta High Court on Tuesday expressed surprise that Shajahan Sheikh, the main accused and "core" of the Sandeshkhali issue, has not been arrested by the state police so far, and said it does not know "whether he is being protected". The division bench, headed by Chief Justice TS Sivagnanam, also refused to interfere with a single bench order on Monday that allowed BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari and another party MLA Shankar Ghosh to visit the Sandeshkhali village. "If one person can hold the entire population to ransom, then that person should not be encouraged by the ruling dispensation," the court observed. The observation was made during the hearing of an appeal by the state government challenging a single bench order, which had also stayed until further orders for the imposition of Section 144 in some areas of Sandeshkhali by the administration.
—PTI
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Mephedrone worth ₹1,100 crore seized in Pune

PUNE, 20 FEB

Police have seized more than 600kg of synthetic stimulant drug mephedrone, estimated to be worth Rs 1,100 crore, in Pune district and arrested three people, said the city police commissioner on Tuesday. The three people arrested in connection with the biggest-ever drug seizure in Pune district were booked under relevant sections of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act (NDPS Act), police said. "Following interrogation of the trio and based on inputs received from them, another operation was carried out in the Kurkumbh MIDC area and 550kg of MD was recovered from a unit there," said Pune police commissioner Amitesh Kumar. Asked about antecedents of the arrested accused, Kumar said they were primarily acting as "courier boys" and had some offences registered against them.*—PTI*

Property tax penalties to be slashed by 50% in B'luru

BENGALURU, 20 FEB

Karnataka Legislative Assembly passed BBMP Property Tax (Amendment) Bill, 2024, on Tuesday, bringing a huge relief to property owners in Bengaluru City limits.

This Amendment Bill will result in a 50 per cent reduction in penalties on property tax dues, saving Bengalureans a whopping Rs 2,700 crore. Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar, who is also the Bengaluru City Development Minister, tabled the Bill in the Assembly's post-lunch session. According to the Bill, the penalty amount will be halved, and BBMP will be able to collect penalties worth Rs 1,000 crore.

This move is expected to benefit a total of 13-15 lakh people in Bengaluru, including 5.51 lakh tax payers, 5-7 lakh people outside the property tax bracket, and 3 lakh partial property tax payers. The Amendment Bill also has a provision for a special rebate to the poor segments of society. Government residential buildings and buildings in slums are exempt from property tax penalties. Buildings up to 1,000 square feet that are used for personal purposes are also exempt from property tax penalties.

Under the Bill, residential and mixed-use properties will have to pay property tax penalties only for a maximum period of five years, regardless of the default duration. Interest has been waived off for dues beyond five years. "This is a tax payer-friendly amendment. We have brought this Bill to help the common people, though it is a burden on the government," said Shivakumar.

The previous BJP government had passed the previous Amendment Bill, which doubled the penalties on property tax dues, resulting in a burden on property tax payers.
—Salar News

Residential and mixed-use properties will have to pay property tax penalties only for a maximum period of five years PHOTO: PTI

SC overturns C'garh mayoral poll verdict

AAP candidate is now winner; poll officer prosecuted

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

Supreme Court on Tuesday declared defeated AAP-Congress alliance candidate Kuldeep Kumar the mayor of Chandigarh. It overturned the result of the controversial poll where BJP nominee had emerged an unlikely winner, in an unprecedented intervention to set right a brazen attempt by the returning officer to rig the election.

It ordered prosecution of returning officer Anil Masih, a BJP leader, for "serious misdemeanour" for making an allegedly false statement before the court that he had invalidated eight ballots because they had been defaced.

Exercising its plenary power under Article 142 of the Constitution to do complete justice, the apex court said the result declared by the returning officer, a nominated councillor, was clearly contrary to law. A bench headed by Chief Justice DY Chandrachud said in such a case, the top court was duty bound, particularly in the context of its jurisdiction under Article 142 of the Constitution, to ensure that the process of electoral democracy is not allowed to be thwarted by subterfuge.

AAP-Congress alliance candidate Kuldeep Kumar is now Chandigarh Mayor PHOTO: PTI

- The apex court said it would be inappropriate to set aside the election process in its entirety when the only infirmity which has been found is at the stage when the counting of votes was done by Masih.

The bench, also comprising Justices JB Pardiwala and Manoj Misra, said the court must step in where exceptional situations develop to ensure that the basic mandate of electoral democracy is preserved.

The top court said in each of the eight ballot papers, which were invalidated by Masih, the votes were duly cast in favour of Kumar.

BJP had won the Chandigarh mayoral polls on 30 January defeating the comfortably placed AAP-Congress alliance candidate after the returning officer declared as invalid eight votes of the coalition partners, drawing accusations of tampering with ballots.

Manoj Sonkar of BJP defeated Kumar after polling 16 votes against his rival's 12 to bag the mayor's post. Sonkar, however, resigned subsequently, while three AAP councillors defected to BJP.

The court noted that as per the result declared on 30 January, Kumar had got 12 votes and his tally of votes now goes up to 20 after adding the eight which were invalidated.

The bench said Masih had evidently put his own mark on these eight ballot papers for the purpose of creating a ground for treating them as invalidly cast. The bench said Masih had made a deliberate effort to deface eight ballots which were cast in favour of Kumar so as to secure a result where Sonkar would be declared elected.

The apex court said it would be inappropriate to set aside the election process in its entirety when the only infirmity which has been found is at the stage when the counting of votes was done by Masih.
—PTI

IN EDUCATION, JOBS

M'rashtra's new bill gives 10% Maratha quota

MUMBAI, 20 FEB

Maharashtra legislature on Tuesday unanimously passed a bill providing 10 percent reservation for the Maratha community in education and government jobs.

Chief Minister Eknath Shinde tabled Maharashtra State Socially and Educationally Backward Bill 2024 in the legislative assembly during the day-long special session of the legislature on Maratha quota. The bill, which was passed unanimously by the House, stated that Marathas comprise 28 percent of the total population of Maharashtra.

Maratha quota bill also proposed that once the reservation comes into effect, its review could be taken after 10 years.

"We want to give reservation to Maratha community without touching the existing quota of the OBCs in the state. Marathas has been struggling for the last 40 years to get reservation benefits," Shinde said.

Maratha quota activist Manoj Jarange, who has been sitting on a hunger strike since 10 February, had demanded that a special session of the legislature be called over the issue.

Eknath Shinde PHOTO: PTI

The government recently issued a draft notification that said if a Maratha person has documentary proof to show that he or she belongs to the agrarian Kunbi community, the person's 'sage sore' or blood relatives too would get Kunbi caste certificates.

Kunbi community falls in the OBC category, and Jarange has been demanding that Kunbi certificates be issued to all Marathas.

Maharashtra cabinet minister Chhagan Bhujbal has been opposing the "backdoor entry" of Marathas into OBC quota but is in favour of a separate reservation for the community.

Out of the total Maratha families that are below the poverty line, 21.22 percent hold yellow ration cards. It is higher than the state's average of 17.4 percent.
—PTI

FARMERS HEAD TO DELHI, HC SAYS CAN'T BLOCK ROADS

CHANDIGARH/ NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

Haryana Police on Tuesday asked its Punjab counterparts to seize bulldozers which they say protesting farmers from Punjab have brought with them as they plan to resume their 'Delhi Chalo' from the interstate border.

Punjab and Haryana High Court on Tuesday orally asked Punjab government not to allow the farmers to gather in large numbers.

The court observed that tractor-trolleys cannot be run on highways according to the Motor Vehicles Act and said the farmers can go to Delhi by bus or using public transport.

The farmers were set to begin their march again on Wednesday from two points on the Punjab-Haryana border after the failure of four rounds of talks with the Centre over a legal guarantee on MSP for crops. Though the farmers are still over 200 km from the national capital, Delhi Police on Tuesday conducted drills to ensure that its heavily barricaded entry points are not breached. Delhi Police was also busy preparing to stop the protesters from entering the national capital and conducted mock drills. Delhi Police has already stocked 30,000 tear gas shells

Tikri and Singhu -- two points on the Delhi-Haryana border -- are sealed with heavy deployment of police.
—PTI
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PM launches rly, road projects worth ₹32,000 crore in J&K

Narendra Modi greets the gathering during the foundation stone laying ceremony in Jammu on Tuesday PHOTO: PTI

JAMMU, 20 FEB

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday launched multiple development projects, including for education, railway, aviation, and road sectors, in Jammu and Kashmir worth over Rs 32,000 crore.

From Jammu, Modi also launched or laid the foundation stone of projects worth Rs 13,500 crore across the country.

These projects include Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), and central universities. Modi distributed appointment letters to about 1,500 newly recruited government employees of Jammu and Kashmir and also interacted with the beneficiaries of various schemes as part of the 'Viksit Bharat, Viksit Jammu programme.

As part of his government's efforts to provide comprehensive, quality, and holistic tertiary-care health services to the people of Jammu and Kashmir, Modi inaugurated the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Vijaypur (Samba), Jammu.

Set up at a cost of over Rs 1,660 crore and in an area spanning over 227 acres, the hospital is equipped with 720 beds, a medical college with 125 seats, a nursing college with 60 seats, an AYUSH block with 30 beds, residential accommodation for faculty and staff, hostel accommodation for UG and PG students and a shopping complex among other facilities. Among other projects, Modi laid the foundation stone for a new terminal building at Jammu airport. Modi also laid the foundation stone of important road projects including two stretches (44.22 km) of the Delhi-Amritsar-Katra expressway.
—PTI

PM promotes movie on Article 370

Jammu, 20 Feb

Modi, while addressing a rally, mentioned an upcoming movie about Article 370, emphasising the importance of the dissemination of accurate information. "I have heard that perhaps a film on Article 370 is going to be released this week. I think your 'Jai Jai Kaar' (cheers) is going to be heard all over the country. Good, it will be useful for people to get correct information," Modi said. The film, titled "Article 370", is produced by Aditya Dhar and is set to hit theatres on 23 February. The release of this film comes ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections in the country, further intensifying the public's interest in the portrayal of the revocation of Article 370. *—PTI*

Cong wins Teachers' constituency seat

BENGALURU, 20 FEB

Congress candidate P Puttanna on Tuesday won the by-election to Karnataka Legislative Council from Bangalore Teachers' Constituency.

He defeated his nearest opponent AP Ranganath, a joint candidate of BJP-JD(S) alliance by a margin of 1,507 votes.

This defeat is seen as a setback for BJP-JD(S) combine, as it was the first election they fought together after the regional party joined BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in September 2023.

Both parties will be fighting the upcoming Lok Sabha polls together for which seat-sharing talks are on. Of the 16,541 votes cast during the polls held on 16 February, Puttanna had secured a total of 8,260 votes, followed by 6,753 votes by Ranganath. 1,239 votes were rejected.

The by-poll was necessitated as Puttanna, who was representing Bangalore Teachers' constituency as a BJP candidate, resigned from the post to switch to Congress to contest the 2023 Assembly polls from Rajajinagar constituency.

Commenting on the poll results, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said that the bypoll result makes it clear that the people have not accepted BJP-JD(S) alliance. The secular mask of JD(S) has come off after it decided to ally with BJP and the people have given a "tight slap to JD(S)' communal avatar", he said. Congratulating Puttanna, Siddaramaiah said, "This is the victory for our government's nine months of pro-people rule".
—PTI

RESIDENTS OPPOSE

Frazer Town says no to Ramzan mela

BENGALURU, 20 FEB

Owing to tremendous pressure from Frazer Town Residents' Welfare Association (FTRWA) and others, the local MLA has decided to put a stop to the famous 'Ramzan Food Mela' in the ensuing holy month of Ramzan. Ramzan is scheduled to begin on 11 March.

Speaking to **Salar News**, MLA of Pulakeshi NagarAC Srinivasa said, "A large number of residents petitioned us to stop the food mela which was creating unnecessary problems during the holy month and the residents claimed that vendors who participate in the mela often encroach on footpaths and create other problems. Taking into consideration the various woes of the residents and worshippers we have decided to respect their sentiments and decided not to have the food mela this year during the month of Ramzan."

The petition was signed by around 5,000 residents. The locals said that the shops are opened by the outsiders and it stinks due to the cooking on the streets. The letter also claimed that the vendors do not dump garbage waste as per solid waste management rules.

"This violates local bylaws and regulations that prohibit commercial activities during certain hours of the night. This is also a violation under Section 61 of the Karnataka Police Act, 1963. The food stalls are set up in close proximity and have encroached upon the way to religious places in our locality, causing inconvenience to the worshippers. This is in violation of the rights of the religious community to have unimpeded access to their place of worship," the residents mentioned in the letter.

Former Pulakeshi Nagar corporator AR Zakir told **Salar News**, "Respecting the sentiments and the demands of the residents it has been decided to do away with the food mela. Guidelines will also be issued to the existing hotel to avoid footpath encroachments, subletting, hygiene and no extended operation beyond permissible hours." Rohita Jaideep, a resident of Cox Town said, "Of course the festive fervour and delicacies are good and we look forward to it as long as residents are not inconvenienced."
—Salar News

SONIA, NADDA AMONG 41 OTHERS ELECTED TO RS

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

Former Congress president Sonia Gandhi, BJP Chief JP Nadda and new party entrant Ashok Chavan and Union ministers Ashwini Vaishnaw and L Murugan were among the 41 candidates elected unopposed to Rajya Sabha on Tuesday while Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh will witness polling on 27 February.

The BJP has won the highest number of 20 seats, followed by the Congress (6), Trinamool Congress (4), YSR Congress (3), RJD (2), BJD (2) and NCP, Shiv Sena, BRS and JD(U) one each. As there were no other candidates in the fray on these 41 seats, the respective returning officers declared them winners on the last date of withdrawal of nominations.

The biennial elections were announced for 27 February in 56 seats. While 50 members will retire on 2 April, six will do so on 3 April. Now polling will be held for 10 seats in Uttar Pradesh, four in Karnataka and one seat in Himachal Pradesh from 9am to 4pm and counting will be held on the same day from 5pm onwards.' Nadda and the party's other nominees Jasvantsinh Parmar, Mayank Nayak and diamond baron Govindbhai Dholakia were declared winners from Gujarat.
—PTI

PHOTO: SALAR

BMRCL unveils first photos of driverless Metro

BENGALURU, 20 FEB

The driverless coaches were unveiled for the Yellow Line. They boasted advanced features, prioritising passenger comfort, safety, and efficiency. These trains will undergo trial runs on the 19.15-km Yellow Line, connecting key areas like Electronic City and RV Road. Manufactured in China by CRRC, the six-coach train set marks a crucial step towards enhancing the City's public transport system. CRRC secured the contract due to its competitive bid and technologically advanced coaches. BMRCL anticipates receiving two more trains by May, followed by subsequent deliveries, paving the way for the Yellow Line's launch in the third quarter of 2024. *—Salar News*

Burglar nabbed; loan sharks held over harassment

BENGALURU, 20 FEB

Mico Layout Police Station arrested a person who burgled a house and stole gold jewelry weighing 525 grams and silver articles weighing 550 grams. Based on his information, the police seized the stolen gold and silver ornaments, mobile phones, and a two-wheeler used in the crime.In another incident, the Cyber Crime Branch (CCB) Organised Crime Squad (West) arrested three people, including a person who ran a usurious business and another person who tried to recover a meter interest loan. The owner of Travels at Ideal Homes in Rajarajeshwari Nagar had taken a loan of Rs 23 lakhs from the usurer and had returned the loan with interest. However, the usurer demanded an additional amount of Rs 5 lakhs and threatened the borrower with the help of a rowdy sheeter. *—Salar News*

Social activist helps woman get pension in Kolar

KOLAR, 20 FEB

A physically challenged woman's pension issue was solved after five months with the help of a social activist. Ashwini, 26, was earlier a resident of Kolar district. She has been getting her pension from government for the past four years without disruptions. After her marriage, she moved to Bagepallitaluk, near Chikkaballapur district.She had submitted all the relevant documents and an application to transfer her pension to Chikkaballapur district, to get pension through Bagepalli Bank. She alleged that authorities have not taken any action to deposit her pension in the bank account for the last five months. She had gone to meet KolarTahsildar on Monday, and while waiting she met Ravindranath, a social activist. She raised her concerns immediately and soon Ravindranath took her to Saraswathamma, a government officer, and she took all the necessary steps to transfer the documents. *—Salar News*

Govt mandates permit for hiring child actors

C'NAGAR, 20 FEB

District Child Labour Project Society has stated that directors, producers, or promoters must obtain permission from the District Collector before hiring children as actors in movies and serials. The move is aimed at protecting the welfare and interests of child actors and ensuring they receive proper education. According to the Child and Youth Labor (Prohibition and Control) Act, 1986, directors, producers, or promoters who intend to cast children as actors in movies or serials must seek permission from the District Collector. *—Salar News*

We tax rich and spend on poor, this is our economics: CM

He also said that govt is working towards protecting the Constitution

BENGALURU, 20 FEB

Strongly defending his government's guarantee schemes, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Tuesday said there was nothing called "Siddanomics".

The Chief Minister said he and his government believed in "good economics", which means taxing the rich by law and spending the money on the poor for their uplift.

He also asserted that his government is working towards protecting the Constitution and making Karnataka "Sarva Janangada ShantiyaTota" (the peaceful garden of all communities) and alleged that the BJP believes in "Manuwad" and not the Constitution.

He was replying to the motion of thanks to the Governor's address to the joint sitting of Karnataka Legislature, in the Legislative Assembly.

Opposition BJP and JD(S) staged a walkout, alleging that the Chief Minister was making a political speech ahead of LokSabha polls, instead of replying to issues raised.

Chief Minister of Karnataka Siddaramaiah addressing the Assembly session at Vidhana Soudha in Bengaluru on Tuesday *PHOTO: SALAR*

Through five guarantees the government has worked towards strengthening the poor and downtrodden socially and economically, he further said, "We have spent Rs 36,000 crore for five guarantees and I have set aside about Rs 52,000 crore in the budget for the next year."

Leader of Opposition R Ashoka and former Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai took a swipe at Siddaramaiah, saying the Chief Minister should take "Siddanomics" as a compliment and consider it as a brand given to his economics.

Ashoka hit out on Siddaramaiah's government for failing to address crucial issues such as the cancellation of programmes such as Kisan Samman, Vidyanidhi, and scholarships initiated by former chief ministers Basavaraj Bommai and BS Yeddyurappa. He highlighted the reduction in scholarship amounts from

- Strongly defending his government's guarantee schemes, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Tuesday said there was nothing called "Siddanomics"

Rs 50,000 to a mere Rs 1,200 and the government's silence on Budget cuts affecting irrigation and public works departments.

Comparing the Congress' Budget to the surplus budgets of the previous BJP government, Ashoka criticised Rs 1.5 lakh crore borrowing under the present regime.

He accused Siddaramaiah of plunging the state into debt.

Defending his government's policies and programmes, Siddaramaiah alleged that BJP-led NDA government at the Centre was "anti-poor, anti-farmer, anti-backwards class, anti-women, anti-minorities and anti-labourers".

Hitting back at Opposition over its accusation that Congress in the State had made the Governor utter lies in his customary address to both Houses of Legislature,Siddaramaiah said the former has spoken the truth.

He attacked BJP and Union government over alleged "injustice" to Karnataka in tax devolution, grants-in-aid, delay in drought relief and delay in clearance or approval for several mega development projects while highlighting the losses incurred by the State under the 15th Finance Commission.

"Despite writing 17 letters over drought relief, only one received a reply saying 'your letter has been received'. To date not a single penny has come from the Central grant," he said.

Siddaramaiah said when he along with Ministers, Congress MLAs and MPs staged a protest in Delhi demanding that the injustice be set right, Prime Minister Narendra Modi accused Congress of trying to divide the country.

—Salar News with Agencies

AS CRISIS HITS CITY

Assembly debates increasing water tanker charges

BENGALURU, 20 FEB

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar on Tuesday was drawn into a debate on the rising rates of water supplied by private tankers in Bengaluru after Opposition BJP MLAs raised the issue in the Assembly.

Shivakumar said that he would consider suggestions by BJP MLAs to fix a rate for water tankers to prevent exploitation of consumers and government takeover of tankers and borewells during summer. During the debate, he also revealed that water from the Cauvery Fifth stage scheme will be supplied by April or May to the 110 villages newly added to Bengaluru.

Raising the issue in the Karnataka assembly BJP MLA BA Basavaraja (Byrathi) demanded that Cauvery fifth stage water should be provided to 110 villages which were added to the Bruhat Bengaluru MahanagaraPalike in 2006.

On the issue of water supply, Shivakumar said Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB) also draws water from borewells on some occasions and supplies them to people, but said that the agency does not have any control over private borewells.

Basavaraja told the House that water suppliers are unable to meet the demand. He pointed out that the tankers were providing water only if residents paid more money. "When there is huge demand, they will increase the rate. Fix a rate like Rs 750-800. It will help people," the BJP MLA said.

Responding to him, Shivakumar said he would convene a meeting soon.

Participating in the discussion, Leader of Opposition (LoP) R Ashoka sought to know what the next course of action would be if there was no water even after existing borewells were redrilled.

—PTI

Farmers concerned over factories crushing immature sugarcane

C'NAGAR, 20 FEB

Farmers in Chamarajanagar are facing a tough time as sugar factories have reportedly begun crushing immature sugarcane, much to the dismay of farmers.

The premature crushing of sugarcane is expected to lead to a reduction in the Fair and Remunerative Price (FRP) offered to farmers, resulting in a potential loss of over Rs 200 per ton of sugarcane, compared to the current rate of Rs 3,200 per ton.

The FRP rate, determined by the central government, is based on the sugar yield of the harvested sugarcane. With immature sugarcane being processed, the sugar yield is expected to decrease, resulting in a loss for farmers.

Ballari Amman Sugar Factory in Kuntur village, Kollegala taluk, allegedly procured sugarcane which has been growing for only 6 to 7 months. Typically, sugarcane should mature for 12 to 14 months before harvesting to ensure optimal sugar production.

Farmers allege that the factory's decision to crush immature sugarcane is a strategic move to alleviate their financial burden, disregarding the negative impact it will have on local sugarcane growers.

Many farmers fear that if this practice continues, it could lead to a decline in the quality of sugarcane and ultimately, a reduction in the prices offered to farmers. The government and agriculture officials have been urged to intervene and take necessary action against sugar factories. *—Salar News*

Ramanagara advocates continue stir demanding SI's suspension

RAMANAGARA, 20 FEB

Advocates continued their protest on Tuesday on the premises of Ramanagara District Commissioner's Office demanding the suspension of Sub-Inspector (SI) of Police Tanveer Hussain.

The protest is in response to Hussain filing an FIR against 40 advocates who claimed during a demonstration over a defamatory post by advocate and SDPI worker Chand Pasha, on a Varanasi judge who gave a verdict in the Gyanvapi mosque case.

A large number of advocates laid siege to the office of the District Commissioner on Monday and did not allow Avinash Menon Rajendran to leave.

They have blocked both entrances to the building, and the agitating advocates have said that they won't move until the SI is suspended and will launch a 'Vidhana Soudha Chalo' agitation on Wednesday.

The incident had taken a communal turn and the police registered an FIR against 40 advocates for assaulting people.

Speaking to reporters, former chief minister HD Kumaraswamy said on Tuesday, "Even as thousands of advocates have been protesting for a week, Congress government has not bothered to listen to them. Action has to be initiated against the failure of the police department. The government is not installed to protect the interests of one community." Deputy Chief Minister, DK Shivakumar, termed Ramanagara situation politics and said, ". Kumaraswamy is raising the matter in the Assembly and the Home Minister will answer to it." *—Salar News*

Mallikarjun Kharge *PHOTO: PTI*

'LEADERS RUNNING TOWARDS BJP AS THEY FEAR ED'

BIDAR, 20 FEB

Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge on Tuesday said leaders who benefitted from the party and became ministers and chief ministers are "running towards" BJP, fearing Enforcement Directorate and Prime Minister NarendraModi.

He attributed Congress's loss of elected governments in several states to BJP because some people who got elected from his party lacked a strong belief in principles.

Addressing a public meeting in Bidar, the district where he was born, Kharge said blamed the loss of its governments in Karnataka in the past, and Madhya Pradesh, Manipur and Goa in more recent times, on this reason. "Some with desire for money, some desire for power and some citing differences with someone else within the party leave Congress to join BJP. Those who don't have courage cannot be successful," he added. These comments from the AICC President have come at a time when several Congress leaders are quitting the party to join other outfits, especially the BJP, and there are speculations about more leaders jumping ship. *—PTI*

St. Gerosa school issue: Education Department begins probe

MANGALURU, 20 FEB

Education department of Karnataka has begun inquiry into the controversial incidents at St. Gerosa School, where a teacher was removed from her post for her alleged anti-Hindu remarks.

Additional Commissioner of Education department in Kalaburagi, Akash Shankar IAS, who arrived in Mangaluru on Monday, collected preliminary information about the incident from officials concerned. The case relates to the teacher at the school who allegedly made some anti-Hindu comments while taking a class on Rabindranath Tagore's poem "Work is Worship."

Additional Commissioner of Education in Kalaburagi collected preliminary information about the incident *PHOTO: SALAR*

Preliminary information has been collected from officials, including DDPI and BEO, at the office of the DDPI, Shankar said.

He said a detailed report will be submitted to the State government after the enquiry. The State government had appointed Shankar to probe the incident after a few parents of students of the school alleged that teacher SR Prabha had hurt religious sentiments of Hindus by making derogatory comments against Lord Ram.

Hindutva outfits and BJP leaders had protested outside the school, forcing the school management to dismiss the teacher.

The school management has denied the allegations against the teacher and had complained that two local BJP MLAs were behind the entire controversy.

An FIR has been registered against MLA S VedavyasKamath and Y Bharat Shetty on the charge of creating enmity among different sections of society. *—PTI*

Metro faces technical snag on Purple Line

BENGALURU, 20 FEB

Bangalore Metro Rail Corporation Limited's (BMRCL) Purple Line of the Namma Metro encountered a technical snag on Tuesday, 20 February 2024, causing inconvenience to commuters. The technical snag occurred around 8:20 am on Tuesday.

As a result of that, many trains were running at slow speeds between Baiyappanahalli and Garudacharpalya stations, leading to delays and disruptions in the entire Purple Line schedule. Yashwanth Chavan the Chief Public Relations officer (PRO) of the BMRCL told Salar News "We promptly addressed the issue and fixed it by 9:20 am.

Meanwhile, to reduce the crowd in Majestic interchange we arranged a short trip from Majestic station to Baiyappanahalli."

This technical snag is one of the most common problem that BMRCL is facing over a long time.

The BMRCL has been working on improving its maintenance and operations to ensure the smooth functioning of the metro network.

"We have faced numerous of these technical snags before but this is the first time the maximum numbers of commuters were affected. However, it took some time for the schedule to fully normalise, and complete normalcy was achieved only around 11:00 am." Chavan added.

—Salar News

'NO REST, POOR FOOD'

Tumakuru woman harassed by employer in Saudi returns home

SALAR EXCLUSIVE

DANIEL GEORGE
BENGALURU, 20 FEB

A 30-year-old woman from Tumakuru, who was subjected to harassment by her employer in Saudi Arabia for over a month, returned home on Sunday, thanks to a social welfare worker who came to her rescue.

In a twist of fate, the woman when she was a little girl living at a Muslim orphanage in Bengaluru witnessed the luxuries Saudi had to offer in 2004. She along with others was invited by the late King Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud to be a state guest for a month and to perform Hajj.

The little girl had performed Hajj and spent a month in the luxurious Metropolitan Palace Hotel, Mecca, thanks to the benevolence of the King.

However, 20 years later, the woman who has four children – two boys and two girls—was forced to seek employment after her husband was diagnosed with heart ailments.

An unscrupulous agent Saleem approached her with a domestic help job offer in Abha, a city near the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia. However, upon reaching Saudi, the woman found herself in a harrowing situation. She was harassed with long hours of work, poor food, bad accommodation, and no rest, a far cry from the luxury she had seen the first time.

Speaking to **Salar News**, Salma S (name changed) said, "I was starry-eyed when I got the job offer as I had memories of all the luxuries in Saudi I had seen when I was a little girl.

The family harassed me with long hours of work with no rest, poor food, and bad accommodation."

After facing continuous harassment, the woman fled the house and sought assistance from fellow Indians, who put her in touch with social worker Ashraf Kuttichal. Kuttichal helped the woman seek shelter and got in touch with the Indian diplomatic mission to inform them about her plight.

He also purchased a ticket for her, as she could not afford it, and ensured that she boarded the flight safely.

"I am now left without a source of income and I appeal to the community and the State government to help me tide over this crisis," she said.

According to social workers and sources aware of the tourist visa scam in Saudi Arabia, a large number of women from Bengaluru and other parts of Karnataka are being duped into paying huge sums of money to go to Saudi Arabia on tourist visas and then they are left in the lurch.

—Salar News

BJP slams govt for paying compensation to Kerala man killed by elephant

BENGALURU, 20 FEB

PHOTO: SCREENGRAB

- BJP has accused Karnataka government of "illegally allocating" Rs 15 lakh to the kin of a Kerala man who was killed by an elephant captured in Karnataka but later strayed into Wayanad in the neighbouring state

BJP has accused Karnataka government of "illegally allocating" Rs 15 lakh to the kin of a Kerala man who was killed by an elephant captured in Karnataka but later strayed into Wayanad in the neighbouring state.

With Congress leader Rahul Gandhi being the MP from Wayanad, BJP's Karnataka unit president BY Vijayendra on Monday alleged that Congress government in Karnataka was misusing taxpayers' money "to curry favour" with the former party president.

He said that amid crippling drought and hundreds of farmers committing suicides across Karnataka, Congress government "shamelessly prioritised pleasing Gandhi over addressing the State's urgent needs".

"Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and his cohorts must be held accountable for unethically looting Karnataka taxpayers' money and State treasury to cater to Congress High Command's greed," BJP State chief said.

Amidst Congress party's struggle for survival, its ministers are sparing no effort in plundering every last rupee of the State's coffers, Vijayendra alleged.

On Sunday, Karnataka Forest Minister Eshwar Khandre said the State government has agreed to pay compensation to the Kerala man on par with the indemnity paid to the people of Karnataka killed by an elephant.

The tuskless male elephant was captured in Belurtaluk of Hassan district on 30 November, 2023, and translocated to the Bandipur Forest area. After more than two months, it was found that it had strayed into Wayanad district of Kerala.

On 10 February, a man was killed by the elephant in Wayanad district of Kerala. Following this, elected representatives and Government of Kerala had requested Karnataka government to be large-hearted and pay compensation for that case, minister's office said. *—PTI*

Rahul granted bail in 2018 defamation case

SULTANPUR, 20 FEB

A special court on Tuesday gave Congress leader Rahul Gandhi bail in a defamation case filed by a BJP leader for his remarks against Union Home Minister Amit Shah in 2018. Gandhi, who could not attend the last hearing in the special MP-MLA court on 18 January as he was busy with his Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, appeared in court today. He was granted bail by Judge Yogesh Yadav after filling bail bonds, his counsel Kashi Prasad Shukla said. BJP leader Vijay Mishra filed the case on 4 August 2018 for Gandhi's alleged objectionable comments against Shah at a press conference in Bengaluru on 8 May 2018 during Karnataka elections. The complainant referred to Gandhi's comment that BJP claims to believe in honest and clean politics but has a party president who is an "accused" in a murder case. Shah was BJP president when Gandhi remarked. About four years before Gandhi's remark, a special CBI court in Mumbai discharged Shah in a 2005 fake encounter case when he was a minister of state for home in Gujarat. *—PTI*

SP's Swami Prasad Maurya resigns from party

LUCKNOW, 20 FEB

A week after tendering his resignation from the post of Samajwadi Party national general secretary, Swami Prasad Maurya on Tuesday resigned from the party's primary membership and Uttar Pradesh Legislative Council. "I got an opportunity to work with you. But after our talks on 12 February and my resignation (as national general secretary) on 13 February, no initiative of any talks with me was taken due to which I am resigning from the primary membership of the party," Maurya said in a letter to party chief Akhilesh Yadav. Maurya resigned as the party's national general secretary on 13 February, accusing the leadership of discriminating against him and not defending him over his controversial statements on Ramcharitmanas and Ayodhya temple consecration ceremony. *—PTI*

Tharoor conferred France's highest civilian honour

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

Shashi Tharoor, a prolific author, and a diplomat-turned-politician was conferred France's highest civilian honour "Chevalier de la Legion d'honneur" at a ceremony on Tuesday. Author of several books and Congress MP from Thiruvananthapuram, Tharoor was conferred the prestigious award at the French Embassy by French Senate President Gerard Larcher. French government had announced the award for Tharoor, in August 2022 but was conferred on him on Tuesday. Receiving the recognition, Tharoor said he was immensely honoured to accept the Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur (Knight of the Legion of Honour) *—PTI*

Dhami visits Ayodhya along with cabinet colleagues

AYODHYA, 20 FEB

Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami and his cabinet colleagues visited Ayodhya to have the darshan of Ram Lalla on Tuesday. Dhami and his colleagues were given a grand welcome when they reached Maharishi Valmiki International Airport in Ayodhya. The entire campus echoed with slogans of 'Jai Shri Ram'. Dhami became emotional after having the darshan of Ram Lalla. He said that after the darshan, his heart is filled with devotion and joy. He said that Ram Lalla had to live in a tent for many years. Dhami said that Uttarakhand government has made preparations to build a state guesthouse for the people of Uttarakhand in Ayodhya, the city of Lord Shri Ram. "Our government has sanctioned an amount of Rs 32 crore for the purchase of land to build this state guesthouse, which will be built on 4700 square meters," Dhami added. *—ANI*

Oppn visits Sandeshkhali, claims situation 'horrific'

Ruling TMC accused the BJP of vitiating atmosphere

SANDESHKHALI, 20 FEB

Following the intervention of the Calcutta High Court, the BJP and the CPI(M) on Tuesday visited the trouble-torn Sandeshkhali area, first by Opposition parties since protests broke out there, and their leaders claimed that the situation was "horrific" and "emblematic of anarchy".

The ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC), which has been vehemently opposing the visits by Opposition parties, accused the saffron camp of trying to vitiate the atmosphere of the area, which was limping back to normalcy.Meanwhile, the Calcutta High Court not only allowed Leader of Opposition in the West Bengal Assembly Suvendu Adhikari of the BJP to visit the restive Sandeshkhali village but also observed that it is surprising that TMC leader Shajahan Sheikh, the main accused and "core" of the Sandeshkhali issue, has not been arrested by the state police so far.

The division bench presided by Chief Justice TS Sivagnanam refused to interfere with a single bench order that allowed Adhikari and another BJP MLA Shankar Ghosh to visit Sandeshkhali in North 24 Parganas district. BJP leaders Adhikari and Ghosh were welcomed by locals, including women, after they reached Sandeshkhali by crossing the Kalindi River on a boat from Dhamakhali.

"The experiences narrated by the locals are spine-chilling. Their land has been usurped, and women exploited... Everything happened with the help of the police and the administration. The situation is horrific and is a clear example of anarchy prevailing in the area," he claimed while visiting the houses of villagers.

Drawing comparisons with the Nandigram anti-land acquisition movement during the Left Front regime, Adhikari claimed that the agitation by the tormented women of Sandeshkhali would lead to the downfall of the TMC government in the state in the days to come.

BJP leader was a close confidante of TMC supremo during the days of the anti-land acquisition movement in Nandigram in 2007-08. He switched over to the BJP ahead of the 2021 Assembly polls. *—PTI*

High Court allowed LOP Suvendu Adhikari to visit Sandeshkhali *PHOTO: PTI*

IPS officer slams BJP workers for calling him 'Khalistani'

SANDESHKHALI, 20 FEB

The situation escalated when a group of BJP members allegedly referred to a Sikh IPS officer as 'Khalistani', leading to a voracious protest by him. BJP MLA Agnimitra Paul, accompanying Adhikari, claimed that the police officer wasn't fulfilling his duties and rejected the allegation that BJP supporters called him a 'Khalistani'.The situation escalated into a major political row, with Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee asserting that the BJP's divisive tactics have egregiously crossed constitutional limits. She condemned the effort to tarnish the reputation of Sikhs, recognised for their sacrifices and steadfast dedication to the nation. *—PTI*

Editors Guild worries over arrest of journo

Chennai, 19 Feb

The Editors Guild of India expressed concern over the arrest of journalist Santu Pan by West Bengal Police while he was reporting live for Republic Bangla television channel in Sandeshkhali. The Kolkata Press Club also condemned the arrest and demanded his immediate release. *—PTI*

AHEAD OF POLLS

Home Minister Amit Shah attends meeting of Bharatiya Janata Party's state election committee in Bikaner *PHOTO: PTI*

Shah visits R'than, says Cong can't develop India

JAIPUR, 20 FEB

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Tuesday targeted the Congress saying that the party cannot develop India or work for the welfare of the poor. Addressing BJP workers in Udaipur, he called the Congress a dynastic and directionless party. "Congress party cannot develop India. It cannot provide welfare to the poor," Shah said, adding that the Modi government did several public welfare works in 10 years. He also said the Congress is unable to enhance India's pride."

The Congress is a dynastic party. It is also a directionless party," he said. Shah also alleged that the Congress "kept the issue of Ram Temple hanging" and always questioned the BJP about when the temple would be built. "The party never had the intention that the Ram Temple is built in Ayodhya," he said. Chief Minister Bhajanlal Sharma and state BJP president CP Joshi received Shah at the Bikaner airport. From the airport, they left for the venue of the meeting. Shah will focus on three "clusters", comprising three Lok Sabha seats each, of Jaipur, Udaipur and Bikaner during his visit.

BJP, which came to power in Rajasthan in December last year by winning 115 of the 200 Assembly seats, is eyeing to win all 25 Lok Sabha seats in the desert state in the general election likely to be held in April-May. However, the BJP faced a major embarrassment when its candidate, Surendrapal Singh TT, lost the Karanpur seat in Sriganganagar district, where the election was held in January due to the death of the Congress candidate, despite the party making him a minister.

Sriganganagar, an area dominated by farmers, falls under the Bikaner division in north Rajasthan. Taking serious note of the party's performance in Karanpur, it is believed that Shah has started his tours to review the preparations for the Lok Sabha polls from Bikaner. The BJP's strategy also focuses on the farmers' region, that shares its borders with Punjab and Haryana.*—PTI*

10 MLAs suspended from Gujarat Assembly for a day

GANDHINAGAR, 20 FEB

Ten legislators from Opposition Congress were suspended from Gujarat Assembly for a day on Tuesday following chaos and sloganeering over the issue of a "fake" government office unearthed in Chhota Udepur district last year and siphoning off funds meant for irrigation projects.

While Congress' strength in the House is 15, five of its MLAs were absent at the time of chaos in the House.

During question hour of the ongoing budget session, Congress MLA Tushar Chaudhary sought to know what action the government had taken against those who had opened a "fake" government office in Chhota Udepur district and siphoned off government funds meant to carry out various irrigation projects in tribal areas.

In a written reply, Tribal Development Minister Kuber Dindor said no such office was found during the last one year and thus no question arises about action to be taken.

He was referring to the arrest of two persons in October last year for allegedly securing Rs 4.16 crore in government grants by setting up a fake office of an executive engineer for irrigation projects.

Later, former IAS officer BD Ninama, who took voluntary retirement in February last year, was arrested by Dahod district police for allegedly helping the other accused in carrying out the "scam" and securing government grants worth Rs 18.59 crore under 'Tribal Area Sub Plan'.

When Congress MLA Amrutji Thakor sought to know how much funds were given to the accused, Dindor said his department had disbursed Rs 21 crore to the persons as they posed as genuine government officers.

"This scam was busted by the state government itself and then it came in the media. We took suo motu action. We have lodged FIRs against the accused and also arrested five persons so far," the minister said.

Since his oral answer was different from what was mentioned in the written reply, Congress MLAs started raising slogans against BJP government, accusing it of concealing facts.

When Congress MLAs did not calm down despite repeated requests by the speaker, state legislative and Parliamentary affairs Minister Rushikesh Patel slammed Congress for the chaos and moved a motion to suspend all of them for the entire day, including the second sitting. *—PTI*

While Congress' strength in the House is 15, five of its MLAs were absent at the time of chaos in the House *PHOTO: PTI*

WILL YOU APOLOGISE TO LG, DELHI HC TO MLAS

NEW DELHI, 2 FEB

The Delhi High Court on Tuesday asked seven BJP MLAs, suspended from the Delhi Assembly for interrupting the lieutenant governor's address, if they were willing to apologise to him.

Justice Subramonium Prasad asked the senior counsel appearing for the suspended legislators to take instructions on this aspect after the senior lawyer for the Assembly said a similar approach was adopted in the Supreme Court in the case of MP Raghav Chadha.Appearing for the Assembly, senior advocate Sudhir Nandrajog said the matter is not political. *—PTI*

No confidence against Khattar govt, debate on 22 Feb

CHANDIGARH, 20 FEB

Haryana Assembly Speaker Gian Chand Gupta on Tuesday admitted a no-confidence motion moved by the main Opposition Congress against the Manohar Lal Khattar government.

The speaker fixed the time of the debate for Thursday. Gupta admitted the no-confidence motion after a headcount of over 18 MLAs as required under the rules.

Recently, Leader of Opposition in the Haryana Assembly Bhupinder Singh Hooda accused Khattar government of having failed on all fronts. He had recently said Congress would bring a no-confidence motion during the session.Congress had also brought a motion of no-confidence against BJP-JJP government three years ago but it was defeated.

Chief Minister Khattar had recently referred to the previous no-confidence motion, saying he had challenged the opposition that they must table such a motion during every session so that they can hear about the work done by his government. Otherwise, they just speak without listening.

If Congress brings a no-confidence motion again, they will be compelled to hear about the works done by the government, Khattar added.

BJP has 41 MLAs in the 90-member House while its alliance partner, Jannayak Janta Party (JJP), has 10.

Six of the seven Independent members in the House support BJP, which also enjoys the support of lone Haryana Lokhit Party MLA Gopal Kanda. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

NITISH PLANS TO REDUCE SCHOOL TIMING

PATNA, 20 FEB

Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar on Tuesday assured the Assembly that the existing eight-hour school duration from 9am to 5pm in government-run institutions will be reduced by two hours.He said the new timings will be from 10am to 4pm (six hours).

His assurance came amid uproarious scenes in the Assembly by opposition members, who entered the well of the House, protesting the "inhuman" timings.

"I will immediately call the competent officer of the department and will direct him to change the timings. You (opposition members) people should have told me earlier. Now the new timings will be from 10am to 4pm," Kumar said.His reference was to the fact that the timings were issued by the then education minister Chandra Sekhar of the RJD when the JD(U) was in the Mahagathbandhan.

The education department had in November last year issued the new timings for the schools. *—PTI*

Moscow never hurt India's interests: EAM

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

Following the conflict in Ukraine, India's energy suppliers in Middle-East gave priority to provide petroleum products to Europe that paid higher prices.

New Delhi did not have any option but to procure Russian crude oil which in turn stabilised the global energy market, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said.

Jaishankar also suggested that India was open to play the role of a mediator to end Russia-Ukraine conflict if approached, but at the same time, New Delhi does not believe that it should initiate anything in this direction on its own.

He asserted that just as India does not expect Europe to have a view of China that is identical to New Delhi's, Europe should understand that India cannot have a view of Russia that is identical to the European one. "Let us accept that there are natural differences in relationships," he said.The external affairs minister said India has had a "stable" and "very friendly" relationship with Russia, and that Moscow never hurt New Delhi's interests.He argued that if no one had bought the crude oil from Russia and everyone had procured it from the other countries, prices on the energy market would have shot up even further."Global inflation would have been much higher -- and that would have been a huge political issue in lower-income countries," he added. *—PTI*

India's Foreign Minister S Jaishankar *PHOTO: PTI*

'Nath joining BJP a creation of media'

BHOPAL, 20 FEB

Congress General Secretary Bhanwar Jitendra Singh on Tuesday said there is no truth in the speculation of senior party leader Kamal Nath joining the BJP and claimed such talks were a creation of the media and the saffron party.

Singh, the AICC in-charge of Madhya Pradesh, arrived in Bhopal on Tuesday in the backdrop of suspense over former Chief Minister Kamal Nath's next move and escalating tension within the state Congress. Asked about the speculation over Nath's next political move, Singh told reporters, "All these things are raised by the media and BJP. There is no truth in it."

He arrived here to attend a Congress meeting to review preparations ahead of the entry of party leader Rahul Gandhi-led 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' in Madhya Pradesh.

He said that in the meeting scheduled on Tuesday, preparations for the yatra will be discussed with all the MLAs and top leaders of the organisation.

MP Congress president Jitu Patwari said the people of the state are waiting for justice. *—PTI*

'DELHI CHALO' MARCH

Farmers ask Centre to accept their demands

CHANDIGARH, 20 FEB

Farmer leader Sarwan Singh Pandher on Tuesday sought that Centre accept their demands, including a legal guarantee on the minimum support price (MSP) for crops and farm loan waiver, and said they will head to Delhi on Wednesday.

His statement came a day after the farmer leaders taking part in "Delhi Chalo" agitation rejected Centre's proposal for procuring pulses, maize, and cotton at the MSP by government agencies for five years, saying it was not in favour of farmers.

In the fourth round of talks with the farmer leaders on Sunday, a panel of three Union ministers proposed that government agencies would buy pulses, maize and cotton at the MSP for five years after agreeing with farmers.

On the issue of loan waiver, according to government reports, farmers have a total debt to the tune of Rs 18.5 lakh crore.

Pandher, who represents Kisan Mazdoor Morcha, said he requested Prime Minister Narendra Modi to announce that the farm loans would be waived, while a mechanism for the same could be worked out later.

"BJP claims that the present prime minister is a strong prime minister. If he announces waiving the debt of 80 crore farmers and farm labourers, it will stamp the BJP's claim that he is a strong prime minister," Pandher said.

On the issue of the death of two farmers during the ongoing protest, Pandher said Punjab government should announce a policy in this regard and seek compensation and jobs for one of the family members of the deceased.

The protesting farmers have been staying put at Shambhu and Khanauri border points between Punjab and Haryana, after their "Delhi Chalo" march to press BJP-led Centre for various demands, including a legal guarantee on the MSP for crops, was stopped by security forces. *—PTI*

Farmers at the Punjab-Haryana Shambhu border during their Delhi Chalo protest *PHOTO: PTI*

- On the issue of loan waiver, according to government reports, farmers have a total debt to the tune of Rs 18.5 lakh crore

PHOTO: INSTAGRAM/RITURAJ K SINGH

' Anupamaa' actor Rituraj Singh dies at 59

MUMBAI, 20 FEB

TV actor Rituraj Singh passed away last night in Mumbai at the age of 59, a close friend of the late actor Amit Behl confirmed to ANI.The TV actor was suffering from pancreatic disease and was hospitalized recently. He has passed after suffering a cardiac arrest.Arshad Warsi took to X to pay tribute and wrote, "I am so saddened to know that Ritu Raj passed away. We lived in the same building, he was a part of my first film as a producer. Lost a friend and a great actor... will miss you brother..." Film director Vivek Ranjan Agnihotri took to X and wrote, "Rituraj, my friend, how did you make it even possible? "Kitna baaki tha..." Artists never die. Om Shanti."Notably, Rituraj has appeared in several television shows, including 'Hitler Didi,' 'Shapath,' 'Aahat,' 'Adaalat,' and 'Diya Aur Baati Hum' among others.—*ANI*

India records 105 fresh Covid-19 cases

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

India saw a single-day rise of 105 Covid-19 cases, while the number of active cases of the infection was recorded at 875, the Union health ministry said on Tuesday. A new death due to the viral disease was reported from Punjab in a span of 24 hours, according to the ministry's data updated at 8am.The number of daily Covid cases was in double digits till 5 December, 2023, but it began to rise after the emergence of a new variant of the virus and cold weather conditions. After 5 December, the maximum of 841 cases were reported on 31 December, 2023, which was 0.2 per cent of the peak number of cases reported in May 2021, official sources said.—*PTI*

Landslides block Jammu-Srinagar Highway for 2nd day

BANIHAL/JAMMU, 20 FEB

The strategic Jammu-Srinagar National Highway remained blocked for the second day on Tuesday following landslides at over a dozen places in Ramban district, traffic department officials said. The inclement weather is hampering the road clearance operations at the affected areas between Ramban and Banihal, the officials said, advising people to avoid taking the road till further updates."The Jammu-Srinagar National highway (NH-44) is blocked due to Landslides/Mudslides/shooting stones.He said the road clearance operations have also been impeded by the third straight day of rain.On Monday also, a traffic department official said the traffic on the 270-km highway was suspended around 9.30 am following landslides triggered by heavy rains in Dalwas, and Shalgadi. —*PTI*

Cops seize 2kg of explosives hidden by Naxalites in M'rashtra

GADCHIROLI, 20 FEB

Police have recovered two kilograms of explosives packed in a pressure cooker hidden by Naxalites beneath the ground in a forest in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district, officials said.An information was received that Naxalites, with an aim to harm the police, had hidden explosives and other articles in a huge quantity in the Gondri forest under Kurkheda taluka, a release from the office of Gadchiroli's superintendent of police (SP) said. The Bomb Detection and Disposable Squads (BDDS) were directed to conduct a search operation in the area. The BDDS destroyed the explosives on the spot, it said. —*PTI*

UGC asks all universities to promote new criminal laws

UGC orders universities to dispel 'myths' surrounding the laws

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

The major changes proposed in the new criminal laws include introduction of definition of child and inclusion of transgender in definition of gender *PHOTO: UGC*

The University Grants Commission (UGC) has directed universities and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the country to publicise the new criminal laws and dispel "myths" surrounding them.

Among the "myths" cited by the UGC are that the new laws "threaten" individual freedom and aim to establish a "police state", that sedition provisions have been retained under 'Deshdroh' and that these legislations enable "police torture".

In its communication to the universities and HEIs, the UGC has also sent flayers mentioning these myths and truths.

UGC Secretary Manish Joshi said, "The Higher Educational Institutions have been requested to publicise the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 around the themes contained in the flyers and by carrying out campaigns by way of displays through standees, distributing flyers and organising seminars and talks by lawyers, judges both serving and retired and their respective faculties in their institutions."

The HEIs have also been asked to share the details of the activities undertaken to the Ministry of Education for sending them to Home Ministry, he added.

The Bharatiya Sakshya Sanhita, 2023, The Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita Bill, 2023, and The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 were passed by both Houses of Parliament during the Winter Session. They were enacted into law after they got assent from President Droupadi Murmu.

They will respectively replace Indian Evidence Act, 1872, the Criminal Procedure Code, 1973 and the Indian Penal Code (IPC).

In its flyers the UGC has mentioned the following "myths": "The new criminal laws threaten individual freedom, aim to establish a police state; (they) are mere repackaging of existing draconian provisions; the extension of custody from 15 to 90 days in the new criminal laws is a shocking provision enabling police torture; sedition is gone, but appears as 'Deshdroh' in Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023 and harsh punishment in hit-and-run cases under Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023".

- New chapters on offence against woman and child and 'inchoate offences' (attempt, abetment and conspiracy) have been introduced

The major changes proposed in the new criminal laws include introduction of definition of child; inclusion of transgender in the definition of 'gender'; inclusion of electronic and digital records in the definition of document and widening of the definition of 'movable to include property of every description.

New chapters on offence against woman and child and 'inchoate offences' (attempt, abetment and conspiracy) have been introduced while beggary has been introduced as a form of exploitation for trafficking. —*PTI*

WILDLIFE ATTACK ROW

Kerala ministers at meeting in Wayanad on Tuesday *PHOTO: ANI*

Youth Cong stages black flag protest against ministers

T'PURAM, 20 FEB

The Wayanad Youth Congress Committee staged a black flag protest at the Kerala forest Minister's convoy, which arrived in the district on Tuesday, to visit the families of deceased people affected by the tusker attack.

The outraged Youth Congress activists raised a black flag at the Minister's Convoy near Sulthan Bathery, Wayanad, Kerala.

Amid the protest, police have taken seven youth Congress workers into custody.

Four Ministers Including Forest Minister AK Saseendran, Revenue Minister K Rajan, Schedule Tribe Minister K Radhakrishnan and Local Self-government Minister MB Rajesh were a part of the convoy, who visited the families of the deceased.

A high-level meeting took place after the visit. Earlier, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan had directed officials to hold a high-level meeting to discuss the issues related to wildlife attacks in Wayanad.

According to the Chief Minister's office, Revenue, Forest and Local Self-Government Department ministers attended the meeting. People's representatives, including the representatives of local bodies of Wayanad district and officials, including high-level officials, also participated in the meeting. —*ANI*

Greece PM visits India to boost ties

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

PHOTO: ANI

Greece's Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, arrived in New Delhi today for a State Visit to India, aimed at strengthening Strategic Partnership between the two nations.

The visit highlights the growing economic, cultural, and defense cooperation between India and Greece. It underscores the shared commitment to deepening bilateral ties and addressing common challenges.Mitsotakis will be the Chief Guest and Keynote Speaker at the 9th Raisina Dialogue, 2024 in New Delhi. He will also visit Mumbai before returning to Athens."

The visit is expected to yield significant outcomes in trade, investment, cultural exchanges, and defense cooperation.

Both countries are poised to explore new avenues for collaboration and reinforce their commitment to a future of mutual prosperity and cooperation. India-Greece relations have been elevated to 'Strategic Partnership' during Modi's visit to Greece in August 2023.

They are based on shared cultural values, commitment to foster economic growth, and collaboration. —*PTI*

9 MONTHS OF STRIFE

Manipur tribal body withdraws call to skip work over cop's suspension

IMPHAL, 20 FEB

PHOTO: ANI

A tribal body in Manipur has withdrawn its appeal to government employees to refrain from attending work over the suspension of a head constable who was allegedly seen with armed men in a video grab.

On Monday, state government offices in Churachandpur and neighboring Pherzawl districts recorded thin attendance after Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF) urged staffers to refrain from attending work.

ITLF stated that its demand for "replacement" of district SP and DC, and revocation of suspension of a head constable have not been met.

ITLF also "expressed regret" over the violence that occurred at a government complex housing DC and SP offices in Churachandpur on 15 February and claimed that it took place without the tribal body's knowledge while urging people to "refrain from engaging in such aggressive behavior.

At least two people were killed and 30 injured in firing by security forces after a mob barged into a government complex, torched vehicles, and ransacked government property in Churachandpur on 15 February, after the suspension of head constable Siamlalpaul.

Chief Minister N Biren Singh condemned the violence and said that an First Information Report (FIR) had been lodged against one person for threatening to kill SP and the damaged DC bungalow was being repaired.

The state government has also ordered a magisterial inquiry to ascertain the facts and circumstances leading to the incident and sought submission of the report within 30 days. —*PTI*

Ladakh activist to renew fast after talks with govt

LEH, 20 FEB

Sonam Wangchuk, a key campaigner for constitutional safeguards for Ladakh, on Tuesday, said the proposed "fast unto death" protest will be reviewed next week, depending on the outcome of talks with Centre over their various demands, including statehood to Union Territory.

Ladakh leadership, which is presently camping in the national capital, temporarily dropped the "fast unto death" program after a fresh round of talks with the central government on Monday, terming the development as significant.It said Centre had agreed to discuss threadbare the demands for Ladakh's statehood, the inclusion of the Union Territory in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, and the setting up of an exclusive public service commission for the high-altitude region.The agreement was agreed during a meeting between the High Powered Committee (HPC) for Ladakh, headed by Union Minister of State for Home Nityanand Rai, and a 14-member delegation of the Apex Body of Leh (ABL) and Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA), representing various organisations of the Union Territory. Several organisations in Ladakh had demanded a separate Union Territory for the region for decades and the demand was fulfilled on 5 August 2019.KDA and ABL, however, in the recent protested at different locations, including New Delhi, Jammu, and Ladakh, highlighting their demands. —*PTI*

Class 10 boy hangs self before board exams

BHUBANESWAR, 20 FEB

A class 10 student died allegedly by suicide in Odisha's Bolangir district hours before the commencement of the annual state board examination on Tuesday.

The incident took place at Viswatma S Vidyamandir in the Kamakshi Nagar area in Bolangir district. The deceased student was from Taliudar village in the district. He was supposed to appear for the examination at Bhagaban Bidya Mandir center in Khujenpali.The hostel inmates found the boy hanging inside the washroom this morning. He was rushed to the hospital and doctors found him dead."We are unable to understand the cause of his death. He was a meritorious student. The school had no pressure on the student", hostel warden Sambit Kumar said. —*PTI*

12 days after violence, no more curfew in Haldwani

DEHRADUN, 20 FEB

Curfew was lifted entirely from the riot-hit Banbhoolpura area of Haldwani Tuesday morning, 12 days after the restrictions were first clamped following violence over the demolition of an "illegal" madrasa.

Curfew was lifted with effect from 5am, according to an official order.During the days the curfew remained in force, the administration gave relaxation for varying durations.

The violence broke out on 8 February after the demolition of the madrasa in Banbhoolpura.

- Violence broke out on 8 February after demolition of the madrasa in Banbhoolpura

Locals hurled stones and petrol bombs at municipal workers and police on the day, forcing many personnel to seek refuge at a police station, which the mob then set on fire.In the violence, six rioters were killed and more than 100 people, including police personnel and media people, were injured, according to police.

Sixty-eight people have been arrested in the violence. —*PTI*

Sameer Wankhede won't be arrested till 1 March: ED tells HC

MUMBAI, 20 FEB

Enforcement Directorate on Tuesday told Bombay High Court that it will extend till 1 March its previous statement that it would not arrest Sameer Wankhede, the former zonal director of Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), in a money laundering case.

A division bench of Justices PD Naik and NR Borkar accepted the statement and posted Wankhede's petition against the case on 1 March.

ED registered a money laundering case against Wankhede after taking cognisance of a first information report (FIR) by Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) in an alleged Rs 25-crore bribe demand from superstar Shah Rukh Khan's family to spare his son in a drugs case.

- A division bench of Justices PD Naik and NR Borkar accepted the statement and posted Wankhede's petition against the case on 1 March

In his plea against the money laundering case, the 2008-batch Indian Revenue Service (IRS) officer said the ED's case "smacks of malice and vendetta".

Aryan Khan was arrested in the alleged drug bust case on the Cordelia cruise ship on 2 October 2021.

Later, NCB filed a charge sheet in the drugs-on-cruise case against 14 accused but gave a clean chit to Aryan.

The much-hyped case took a twist when an 'independent witness' claimed in 2021 that Rs 25 crore was demanded by an NCB official and others to let off Aryan Khan. —*PTI*

A SEMESTER WASTED

College bars 100 from exams for missing assembly

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

The students claimed that their attempts to meet the principal without their guardians were also rejected *PHOTO: PTI*

More than 100 first-year students of Delhi University's St Stephen's College were allegedly suspended for not attending morning assembly, teachers and students claimed on Tuesday.

According to an email by the first-year students to Principal John Varghese on Monday, they were also debarred from the second semester examination after allegedly failing to meet the principal with their parents for missing the assembly.

There was no immediate reaction available from Varghese.

"We are writing to you regarding the emails sent on 17 February, 2024 (Saturday), to over 100 first-year students of St Stephen's College in which they were suspended and debarred from the semester 2 examinations," the students said in the email to Varghese.

"The reason cited was a failure to set up an appointment with the principal in response to the email sent on 4 February, 2024 (Sunday), wherein these first-year students were asked to do the same due to low attendance in the morning assemblies in the month of January," they said.

The students further said in the email that setting up an appointment wasn't feasible for many "since their parents do not live in Delhi-NCR and, hence, it wasn't possible for them to travel all the way to Delhi at short notice due to prior commitments, scheduling issues, and financial issues".

An email sent to the students' parents and guardians, informing them that their wards had been barred from the second semester examination was claimed to be written by the personal secretary to the principal.

The students claimed that their attempts to fix appointments without their guardians were also rejected.

The alleged suspension was criticised by a member of faculty at the college for "forcing" to take part in a religious activity and on grounds of university rules and regulations. He also demanded disciplinary action against the person concerned who sent the email.

Sanjeev Grewal, head of the college's economics department, said in an email dated February 20 (Tuesday) to Principal Varghese, "I am quite shocked to know that a large number of students have been suspended from college and it has been threatened that they will also be debarred from appearing in the examinations. In my opinion, students can be debarred from appearing in the examinations only on the grounds explicitly stated in the university rules and regulations. —*PTI*

India contributes $1M to combat poverty

UNITED NATIONS, 20 FEB

India has contributed USD 1 million to a fund established by India, Brazil and South Africa which undertake projects aimed at alleviating poverty and hunger.

India's Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj handed over the cheque of USD 1 million as a contribution towards the India, Brazil and South Africa Facility for Poverty and Hunger Alleviation Fund (IBSA Fund) to the Director of the UN Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC) Dima Al-Khatib here on Monday.

Speaking on the occasion, Kamboj said the focus of India's G20 Presidency was the "development of the people, by the people and for the people". Accordingly, "India is committed to supporting the IBSA Fund as we believe that the Fund has made a positive impact on the lives of millions across the Global South and has strengthened the spirit of South-South cooperation," she said.The IBSA countries - India, Brazil and South Africa - each contribute one million dollars annually to the Fund in a spirit of partnership and support for Southern-led, demand-driven, transformational projects in developing countries, a press release issued by the Permanent Mission of India to the UN said.

India's contribution to the IBSA Fund has cumulatively exceeded USD 18 million since the Fund was established in 2004 and became operational in 2006. —*PTI*

MENDENHALL GLACIER

People walk on a frozen Mendenhall Lake, with Mendenhall Glacier in the background in Juneau, Alaska. The glacier is a popular attraction and accessible by crossing the frozen lake when the conditions are right during the winter, but the US Forest Service cautions that lake ice can vary in thickness and that the face of the glacier is prone to calving year-round
PHOTO: PTI

IS MEASLES STARTING TO MAKE A COMEBACK?

Measles diagnosis is usually straightforward through laboratory testing or clinical exam. Vaccination is an inexpensive, safe and very effective preventative measure
PHOTO: HEALTHLINE

There is a gathering storm in many parts of the world right now. India, England, the Americas.

Health experts are sounding the alarm about a resurgence of measles — a completely preventable disease that can have devastating consequences.

Even in Australia, a handful of cases were reported in January after a woman travelled to India where the disease still has a foothold. The cases sparked renewed calls for parents to ensure their children have been vaccinated.

In England, inadequate vaccine uptake has led to a rise in measles cases in children and young adults.

In the Americas, several countries have experienced cases and outbreaks, including the US, which reported 26 cases in December and January alone, compared to 58 cases in all of 2023.

Between 2022 and 2023, the World Health Organisation reported a 45-fold increase in measles cases in Europe. Outbreaks have since occurred across the UK, Europe, the Americas, Africa and Asia, prompting public health officials to issue urgent calls for vaccinations.

This recent resurgence of measles threatens to undo decades of progress made in controlling and eliminating the disease since the vaccine became available 60 years ago. Turning around this trend — even wiping out measles entirely — is not impossible, but it will require real commitment and learning from past mistakes.

Measles is one of the world's most infectious diseases. In an unprotected population, each case can infect up to 18 other people. It affects several organ systems, can lead to complications like pneumonia, ear infections and brain swelling, and is estimated to kill one in every 1,000 infected. Since it affects the immune system, it can reduce a person's ability to fight off other infections, even years later.

The measles vaccine saved an estimated 57 million lives between 2000 and 2022. This vaccine is the key to measles elimination (preventing the circulation of the virus) and eventual eradication (making measles disappear altogether).

Measles diagnosis is usually straightforward through laboratory testing or clinical exam. Vaccination is an inexpensive, safe and very effective preventative measure.

Although several primate species can be infected with measles, humans are the only natural host and other primates are not thought to be able to effectively transmit the virus. This means it's possible to eliminate measles from several parts of the world, and make eradication feasible.

The challenge in eliminating measles is that about 95 per cent of the population would need to be immune. Achieving such high vaccine uptake is difficult even in the best circumstances. Since measles is so infectious, even small decreases in vaccine uptake can quickly result in outbreaks and allow measles to take hold in areas where it hasn't appeared in decades.

Vaccine hesitancy, limited vaccine access in remote or resource-challenged areas, and conflict around the world resulted in nearly 9,00,000 cases of measles in 2019 — the highest number of cases seen globally since 1996.

The Covid-19 pandemic compounded the issue of missed vaccinations, with approximately 61 million missed measles vaccine doses in kids between 2020 and 2022.

These factors have now created a perfect storm as pandemic restrictions ease and people start mixing and travelling, while levels of immunisation remain dangerously low.

Retreating from the brink of measles resurgence will be a challenge. As the Measles and Rubella Partnership states, "Measles moves fast, we must move faster".

However, measles elimination is within reach if the lessons learned about immunisation during the pandemic and previous to it are applied.

The first priority is to raise vaccine uptake, ensuring that children are vaccinated as soon as they are eligible, but also targeting older children and adults to close immunity gaps, with the ultimate goal of 95 per cent coverage with two doses of measles vaccine. Doing this requires public health officials to be nimble and flexible.

Since different groups have different needs, concerns and challenges that must be addressed, vaccination programmes cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach. Rather, the key to success is making vaccines accessible and convenient based on the needs of local communities.

This tailored approach — which is being recommended in England — can include mobile immunisation services, expanded clinic hours, and easy booking for appointments.

When cases arise, adequate disease monitoring systems to detect cases are required so outbreaks can be controlled.

Based on 2022 data, half of the countries that reported on their ability to monitor measles did not meet WHO standards for monitoring, meaning that it is possible that measles is circulating within their borders but they are not aware.

Simultaneously, it is essential to continue to tackle vaccine hesitancy and misinformation.

—Courtesy, 360info

SALAR سالار

RUSSIA'S SPACE WEAPON

Anti-satellite systems posing a risk to spacecraft

In a week where national security has taken centre stage in Washington, the White House confirmed on Thursday that it had evidence that Russia was developing a space-based nuclear anti satellite weapon.

John Kirby, the National Security Council spokesperson, informed reporters that the White House believe Russia's programme to be "troubling", despite "no immediate threat to anyone's safety". The problem is that, depending on what type of weapon this is, the consequences of using it could be indiscriminate – threatening everyone's satellites and causing a breakdown of the vital services that come from space infrastructure.

The White House revelations come after House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Turner urged the administration, late on Wednesday, to declassify information concerning what he called a "serious national security threat". There were then several days of comments and speculation about Russia either being ready to launch a nuclear weapon into space, or deploying an anti-satellite weapon powered by nuclear energy.

Kirby did not fully outline the nature of the threat, but he added that officials believed the weapons system was not an "active capability" and had not been deployed. To reassure those listening, Kirby said that the weapon was not one that could be used to cause physical destruction on Earth but that the White House was monitoring Russian activity and would "continue to take it very seriously".

During a visit to Albania on Thursday, Secretary of State Antony Blinken confirmed the news and stated that he expected to have more to say soon, adding that the Biden administration was "also conferring with allies and partners on the issue".

While discussing the matter with Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Munich Security Conference, Blinken is reported to have "emphasised that the pursuit of this capability should be a matter of concern".

Denials from Russia

Moscow immediately denied the existence of such a programme and stated that it was a "malicious fabrication" created by the Biden administration to pressurise Congress into passing the USD 97bn (£77bn) foreign aid bill, USD 60bn of which was destined for Ukraine. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters: "It is obvious that the White House is trying, by hook or by crook, to encourage Congress to vote on a bill to allocate money; this is obvious".

At a press conference on the death of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, Joe Biden stated that there was "no nuclear threat to the people of America or anywhere else in the world with what Russia is doing at the moment".

The President added that there was "no evidence that they have made a decision to go forward with doing anything in space either". If Moscow did decide to go ahead with the programme it would be contrary to the Outer Space Treaty which 130 countries have signed onto, including Russia.

The treaty prohibits "nuclear weapons or any other kinds of weapons of mass destruction" in orbit or stationing weapons in outer space "in any other manner". Anti-satellite weapons are nothing new. China launched a weapon to destroy a non-operational weather satellite in January 2007.

While the temptation to launch a nuclear strike in space may seem alluring to nations looking to challenge US dominance in the domain, such actions come at huge risk.

Mass of debris

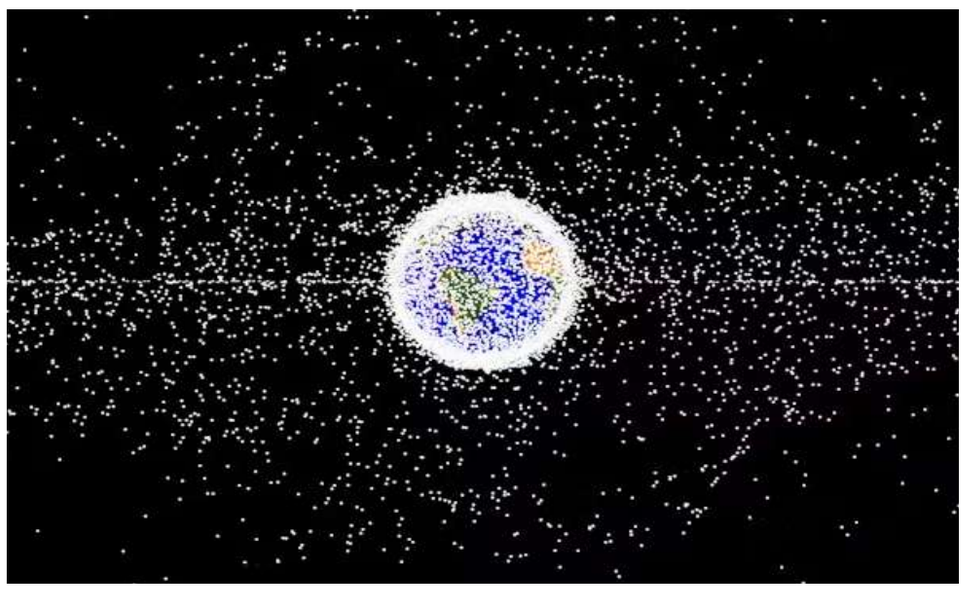
The destruction of any celestial object creates a mass of debris varying in size from a few millimetres to several centimetres. Currently, there are hundreds of millions of tracked pieces of space debris orbiting the Earth.

The speed at which this space debris is travelling makes it a major hazard to other satellites and entities in space such as the International Space Station (ISS), which has to change course in order to avoid collisions which can cause widespread damage. The ISS has had to changed course 32 times since 1999.

This situation has been described in similar terms to that applied to nuclear weapons on Earth, in terms of mutually assured destruction.

If a nuclear strike were to be conducted by a nation in space with the intention of destroying satellites and also to demonstrate both an ability and willingness to use nuclear weapons more generally, it would be next to impossible to control the consequences of such an action.

It would be fairly certain that such a strike would have the intended effect in reducing the space capabilities of an opponent. For example, an attack on US assets could disable the satellite-based global positioning system (GPS) that is relied on by western nations. *—The Conversation*



Space is already crowded with human-made objects and anti-satellite weapons can make the situation much worse
PHOTO: NASA ODPO

LETTERS

Write to us at salar@salar.news

Millions of donkeys killed each year to make medicine

In a new report, the Donkey Sanctuary, which has campaigned against the trade since 2017, estimates that globally at least 5.9 million donkeys are slaughtered every year to supply it
PHOTO: BBC/ THE DONKEY SANCTUARY

To sell water and make his living, Steve relied completely on his donkeys. They pulled him in his cart loaded with its 20 jerry cans to all his customers. When Steve's donkeys were stolen for their skins, he could no longer work.

That day started like most others. In the morning, he left his home in the outskirts of Nairobi and went to the field to get his animals. "I couldn't see them," he recalls. "I searched all day, all night and the following day." It was three days later that he got a call from a friend telling him he had found the animals' skeletons. "They'd been killed, slaughtered, their skin was not there."

Donkey thefts like this have become increasingly common across many parts of Africa - and in other parts of the world that have large populations of these working animals. Steve - and his donkeys - are collateral damage in a controversial global trade in donkey skin.

Its origins are thousands of miles from that field in Kenya. In China, a traditional medicinal remedy that is made with the gelatin in donkey skin is in high demand. It is called Ejiao. It is believed to have health-enhancing and youth-preserving properties. Donkey skins are boiled down to extract the gelatin, which is made into powder, pills or liquid, or is added to food.

Campaigners against the trade say that people like Steve - and the donkeys they depend on - are victims of an unsustainable demand for Ejiao's traditional ingredient.

In a new report, the Donkey Sanctuary, which has campaigned against the trade since 2017, estimates that globally at least 5.9 million donkeys are slaughtered every year to supply it. And the charity says that demand is growing, although the BBC was unable to independently verify those figures.

It is very difficult to get an accurate picture of exactly how many donkeys are killed to supply the Ejiao industry. In Africa, where about two-thirds of the world's 53 million donkeys live, there is a patchwork of regulations. Export of donkey skins is legal in some countries and illegal in others. But high demand and high prices for skins fuel the theft of donkeys, and the Donkey Sanctuary says it has discovered animals being moved across international borders to reach locations where the trade is legal.

However, there could soon be a turning point as every African state's government, and the government of Brazil, are poised to ban the slaughter and export of donkeys in response to their shrinking donkey populations.

These are the same animals that carry people, goods, water and food - the backbone of poor, rural communities. So the scale and rapid growth of the skin trade has alarmed campaigners and experts, and has moved many people in Kenya to take part in anti-skin trade demonstrations.

The proposal for an Africa-wide, indefinite ban is on the agenda at the African Union Summit , where all state leaders meet, on 17 and 18 February.

But could bans across Africa and in Brazil simply shift the trade elsewhere?

Ejiao producers used to use skins from donkeys sourced in China. But, according to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs there, donkey numbers in the country plummeted from 11 million in 1990 to just under two million in 2021. At the same time, Ejiao went from being a niche luxury to become a popular, widely available product.

Chinese companies sought their skin supplies overseas.

- Countries including Tanzania and Ivory Coast banned the slaughter and export of donkey skins in 2022, but China's neighbour Pakistan embraces the trade. Late last year, media reports there trumpeted the country's first "official donkey breeding farm" to raise "some of the best breeds

Donkey slaughterhouses were established in parts of Africa, South America and Asia.

In Africa, this led to a grim tug of war over the trade.

In Ethiopia, where the consumption of donkey meat is taboo, one of the country's two donkey slaughterhouses was closed down in 2017 in response to public protests and social media outcry.

Countries including Tanzania and Ivory Coast banned the slaughter and export of donkey skins in 2022, but China's neighbour Pakistan embraces the trade. Late last year, media reports there trumpeted the country's first "official donkey breeding farm" to raise "some of the best breeds".

And it is big business. According to China-Africa relations scholar Prof Lauren Johnston, from the University of Sydney, the Ejiao market in China increased in value from about $3.2bn (£2.5bn) in 2013 to about $7.8bn in 2020.

It has become a concern for public health officials, animal welfare campaigners and even international crime investigators. Research has revealed that shipments of donkey skins are used to traffic other illegal wildlife products. Many are worried that national bans on the trade will push it further underground.

"Most of the people in my community are small-scale farmers and they use the donkeys to sell their goods," says Steve. He was saving money from selling water to pay for school fees to study medicine.

Faith Burden, who is head vet at the Donkey Sanctuary, says that the animals are "absolutely intrinsic" to rural life in many parts of the world. These are strong, adaptable animals. "A donkey will be able to go for perhaps 24 hours without drinking and can rehydrate very quickly without any problems."

Onyango explains: "We never bred our donkeys for mass slaughter." Prof Johnston says that donkeys have "carried the poor" for millennia. "They carry children, women. They carried Mary when she was pregnant with Jesus," she says.

—BBC News

Aus holds man over North Korea tobacco smuggling

BEIJIN, 20 FEB

A Chinese man is being held in Australia over his alleged role in a tobacco smuggling scheme that generated $700m (£570m) for North Korea. Jin Guanghua now awaits extradition to the US, where he faces prosecution. He is accused of supplying tobacco to Pyongyang for roughly a decade. It is unclear whether he contests the claim. US authorities allege the tobacco trade allowed Kim Jong Un's regime to make and sell counterfeit cigarettes to help fund its weapons programme. Australia's Attorney-General's Department confirmed that Mr Jin had been detained in Melbourne in March last year, and that his "extradition matter" was ongoing. "The individual is wanted to face prosecution in the US for a number of sanctions, bank fraud, money laundering, and conspiracy offences," it said in a statement on Tuesday.
—BBC News

PHOTO: X

Car crash in South Serbia kills 3 migrants

BELGRADE, 20 FEB

A car crash in southern Serbia has killed three migrants and injured 11 others, and the driver was detained for suspected people smuggling, police in the Balkan country said on Tuesday. The 43-year-old Serbian driver had no driver's license and was among those injured in the crash, according to a police statement. The accident occurred late Monday in southern Serbia, near the border with North Macedonia. Both countries lie on the so-called Balkan land route used by migrants trying to reach western Europe. A video on state RTS television showed a smashed white car being taken away from the scene. The report said the vehicle swerved off the road at a high speed.*—AP*

Taiwan protests after China boards a tourist boat

TAIPEI, 20 FEB

Taiwan on Tuesday protested China's boarding of a tourist boat, as tensions rise around the Kinmen archipelago, which lies a short distance off China's coast but is controlled by Taiwan. Taiwanese media reported the King Xia, carrying 11 crew and 23 passengers, was boarded by the Chinese coast guard for about 32 minutes on Monday. Taiwan's coast guard escorted the boat back to Kinmen, and it then continued its sight-seeing voyage. Ocean Affairs Council Minister Kuan Bi-ling told journalists at the legislature that the incident "hurt the feelings of our people, created panic among the people, and was not in the interest of the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait." *—AP*

Baloch American Congress pens letter to US Senate speaker

WASHINGTON, 20 FEB

The President of the Baloch American Congress, Tara Chand on Monday penned a letter to the Speaker of the United States Congress, Mike Johnson, and all other members of the US Senate to take immediate action to stop the Baloch genocide in Pakistan. In a letter, the leader pleaded to address the ongoing genocide of people belonging to the Baloch community and highlighted the various issues faced by the people of Balochistan regularly. "In the ongoing conflict between the Baloch and Pakistan, enforced disappearances and illegal detentions are tools used by the state against the Baloch national resistance. Political activists, poets, students, journalists, intellectuals, and human rights activists are being abducted, illegally detained, subjected to inhuman torture, and their mutilated bodies are dumped in remote areas. *—ANI*

Crew abandons ship in Red Sea after Houthi strikes

Two anti-ship ballistic missiles damaged the Belize-flagged Rubymar

DUBAI, 20 FEB

The crew of a commercial ship in the Red Sea abandoned the vessel following a Houthi attack - the first such evacuation since the militant group began menacing trade in the vital waterway late last year.

Two anti-ship ballistic missiles damaged the Belize-flagged Rubymar on Sunday evening local time, US Central Command said Monday on social media platform X. A coalition warship and another merchant ship responded to the distress call, and the Rubymar's crew were transported to a nearby port, it added.

Since November, the Houthis have escalated their attacks off the coast of Yemen with missiles and drone strikes on the merchant fleet. The Iran-backed group says they are targeting ships with links to Israel, the US and UK - their response to the war in Gaza and western airstrikes that have sought to quell the attacks.

Two anti-ship ballistic missiles damaged the Belize-flagged Rubymar, US said on social media *PHOTO: X/RUBYMAR*

The Rubymar is a relatively small cargo ship. Its registered owner is in Southampton, England, according to the Equasis international maritime database. A Houthi spokesman said in a statement that an attack on an unidentified British ship resulted in its "complete sinking" - a claim that could not be verified independently.

- Centcom didn't mention in its statement whether the Rubymar had sunk, and the vessel's owner didn't respond to an earlier request for comment. UK Maritime Trade Operations had no further updates on the incident

Centcom didn't mention in its statement whether the Rubymar had sunk, and the vessel's owner didn't respond to an earlier request for comment. UK Maritime Trade Operations had no further updates on the incident.

Earlier, a company official at GMZ Ship Management Co. in Lebanon said the attacks on the vessel occurred in the engine room and the front of the ship. There were no reports of injuries to the crew, who were being taken to Djibouti, the official said.

About 12% of global trade - and as much as 30% of container traffic - passes through the Suez Canal, at the other end of the Red Sea, each year. In order to avoid the attacks, a significant percentage of the world's oil and gas carriers, bulk commodity ships and container vessels are now sailing thousands of miles around Africa, adding to voyage times and boosting costs to world shipping.
—Courtesy, Bloomberg

WikiLeaks founder starts final legal battle

LONDON, 20 FEB

PHOTO: X/ WIKILEAKS

Julian Assange's lawyers will begin their final UK legal challenge on Tuesday to stop the WikiLeaks founder from being sent to the United States to face spying charges.

The 52-year-old has been fighting extradition for more than a decade, including seven years in self-exile in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London and the last five years in a high-security prison. Assange's attorneys will ask two High Court judges to grant a new appeal hearing, his last legal roll of the dice in Britain. If the judges rule against Assange, he can ask the European Court of Human Rights to block his extradition – though supporters worry he could be put on a plane to the US before that happens.

Judges Victoria Sharp and Jeremy Johnson could deliver a verdict at the end of the two-day hearing on Wednesday, but they're more likely to take several weeks to consider their decision. "This hearing marks the beginning of the end of the extradition case, as any grounds rejected by these judges cannot be further appealed in the UK – bringing Assange dangerously close to extradition," the press freedom group Reporters Without Borders said.

Assange supporters plan to demonstrate outside the neo-Gothic court building on both days and march to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's Downing Street office at the end of the hearing.

Assange, an Australian citizen, has been indicted on 17 charges of espionage and one charge of computer misuse over his website's publication of classified US documents. US prosecutors say he helped US Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning steal diplomatic cables and military files that WikiLeaks later published, putting lives at risk. *—AP*

NEW GUIDANCE

Sunak bans mobile phones across England's schools

LONDON, 20 FEB

Schools in England have been given new guidance intended to stop the use of mobile phones during the school day.

The government said the move was part of a plan to "minimise disruption and improve behaviour in classrooms". It added that many schools had already banned phones and the change would ensure a consistent approach.

The UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak made the announcement on the X platform with a video message. "Almost one-third of secondary school people said that their lessons were disrupted by phone". But one school leaders' union said the most compulsive use of phones happened out of school and called the change a "non-policy for a non-problem". The guidance comes almost three years after the government first called for a ban on phones in schools.

Education Secretary Gillian Keegan told BBC Breakfast that the guidance aimed to offer "consistency to reset the social norm that there is no place for mobile phones in our schools all the way through the school day". She said there was currently a mixed picture on policy, with some schools allowing use of mobiles during break times and others having an outright ban. Asked if she would go further and bring in legislation, Keegan said: "We would consider what more needed to be done if it [the guidance] did not work".

The guidance comes almost three years after the government first called for a ban on phones in schools *PHOTO: PTI*

Phoebe, a Year 9 student at Sacred Heart Catholic Academy in Crosby, Liverpool, says her school's policy on phones - where pupils can have them but not use them during the school day - helps them focus on their work.

The guidance sets out a number of examples to illustrate how a phone-free environment could be achieved, including a total ban on them on schools, or rules requiring that handsets are given in at the start of the day. *—BBC News*

New round of talks between PML-N, PPP on formation of coalition govt

ISLAMABAD, 20 FEB

The latest round of talks between the top leaders of the PML-N and the PPP has ended inconclusively after both sides failed to reach a consensus on a power-sharing formula to form a coalition government in Pakistan following a fractured verdict in the election. The meeting, held at the residence of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) senior leader Senator Ishaq Dar in parliament lodges here on Monday, saw the participation of prominent figures from both parties. The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) delegation comprised Murad Ali Shah, Qamar Zaman Kaira, Nadeem Afzal Chan, and others, the Express Tribune newspaper reported on Tuesday.

The meeting, held at the residence of PML-N senior leader Senator Ishaq Dar *PHOTO: PAKISTAN: PML-N*

This was the fifth round of discussions between PML-N and PPP coordination committees to end the political stalemate after the February 8 elections resulted in a hung Parliament.

After a three-hour deliberation on Monday, the negotiation hit a snag prompting a temporary halt, with both PML-N and PPP agreeing to reconvene at 10 pm on Monday. *—PTI*

Medical examination sought for Imran's wife

ISLAMABAD, 20 FEB

Jailed former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan's sister has petitioned the Islamabad High Court seeking a medical examination of his wife Bushra Bibi, who is imprisoned at the embattled politician's private home here.

Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party has alleged in a post on X that the former first lady was given "chemical-laced food over a week ago, which has burnt her throat and stomach".

The party on Monday said Bushra, 49, is "unable to eat and is unwell", adding that she has been "denied medical treatment" by the authorities.

"This was a malafide attack on Imran Khan's wife by the illegitimate, fascist, authoritarian regime, in a futile attempt to pressurise Khan into submission," the party claimed.

Khan's sister, Uzma Khan petitioned the court to allow gastroenterologist Dr Asim Yousaf, medical director of Shaukat Khanum Memorial Hospital, to do the medical examination of Khan's wife in the presence of the medical doctor of the jail. The hospital is run by a charitable organisation founded by Imran Khan.
—PTI

Fastest-growing black hole discovered

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

Astronomers have discovered the fastest-growing black hole ever recorded -- the most luminous known object in the universe that is devouring the equivalent of one Sun every day. The researchers at The Australian National University (ANU) noted that the black hole with a mass roughly 17 billion times that of the Sun, has set a record that may not ever be beaten. "The incredible rate of growth also means a huge release of light and heat," said study lead author Christian Wolf, Associate Professor at ANU. "So, this is also the most luminous known object in the universe. It is 500 trillion times brighter than our sun," Wolf said in a statement.

A black hole is a region of spacetime where gravity is so strong that nothing, including light, can escape it. Christopher Onken, co-author of the study published in the journal Nature Astronomy, noted that it was a surprise that the blackhole remained undetected until now, given what we know about many other, less impressive ones. The blackhole was first detected using a 2.3 metre telescope at the ANU Siding Spring Observatory near Coonabarabran in New South Wales.

The research team then turned to one of the largest telescopes in the world to confirm the full nature of the black hole and measure its mass. *—PTI*

CONFIDENTIAL DATA BREACH

UK disrupts Lockbit cybercrime gang

LONDON, 20 FEB

An online site run by a major criminal gang who organise ransomware cyber attacks appears to have been taken over by law enforcement.

The site belongs to the group LockBit. It sells services which allow people to compromise computer networks and hold their data until a ransom is paid. On Monday evening, a message appeared on the site belonging to the group saying it is "now under control of law enforcement".

The message says that the "site is under the control of the National Crime Agency of the UK, working in close cooperation with the FBI and the international law enforcement task force, 'Operation Cronos'."

Police release decryptor in global crackdown *PHOTO: FREEPIK*

It adds that this is an "ongoing and developing operation" and adds: "Return here for more information at 11:30 GMT on Tuesday, 20 February". The operation was conducted by Britain's National Crime Agency, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation, Europol and a coalition of international police agencies, according to the post on LockBit's website.

The UK's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) has previously issued a warning about the "enduring threat" posed by the group, alongside partner agencies in the US, Australia, Canada, France, Germany and New Zealand. The statement from last year adds that LockBit's eponymous software was the "most deployed ransomware variant" across the world in 2022, and that it "continues to be prolific so far in 2023".

LockBit has been involved in many high profile hackings, including the UK's Royal Mail in early 2023.
—BBC NEWS

DRAFT RESOLUTION

US calls for temporary truce in Gaza

People stand on a highway as black smoke rises from an industrial district, attacked by Israeli strikes, in Ghazieh, Lebanon *PHOTO: PTI*

RAFAH, 20 FEB

The US has proposed a draft resolution at the UN Security Council which calls for a temporary ceasefire in Gaza.

It has also warned Israel against invading the overcrowded city of Rafah. The US has previously avoided the word "ceasefire" during UN votes on the war, but President Joe Biden has made similar comments.

However, the US plans to veto another draft resolution - from Algeria - which calls for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire. More than a million displaced Palestinians, who represent about half of Gaza's population, are crammed into Rafah after being forced to seek shelter there. The southern city, which borders Egypt, was home to only 250,000 people before the war. Many of the displaced are living in makeshift shelters or tents in squalid conditions, with scarce access to safe drinking water or food.

The UN has issued its own warning that a planned Israeli offensive in the city could lead to a slaughter. Israel launched its operations in Gaza following an attack by Hamas gunmen on southern Israel on 7 October, during which about 1,200 people were killed and more than 240 others taken hostage.

The Israeli military campaign has killed 29,000 people in the Palestinian territory, according to the Hamas-run health ministry there. Washington has come under immense international pressure to use its leverage to rein in Israel's devastating operations, having spent much of the war emphasising its ally's right to self-defence. While it has vowed to block the Algerian draft, its rival text does register Opposition to Israel's plans.
—AP

Israel orders evacuations in Northern Gaza

RAFAH, 20 FEB

Israel ordered new evacuations from parts of Gaza City on Tuesday, as a study led by the UN children's agency found that one in six children are acutely malnourished in the isolated and largely devastated north of the territory, where the city is located.

The report finds deepening misery across the territory, where Israel's air and ground offensive, launched in response to Hamas' 7 October attack, has killed over 29,000 Palestinians, obliterated entire neighbourhoods and displaced more than 80% of the population.

Israel has vowed to expand the offensive to the Gaza Strip's southernmost city of Rafah, where more than half of the territory's population of 2.3 million has sought refuge from fighting elsewhere. Many have crowded into sprawling tent camps and overflowing UN-run shelters near the Egyptian border. The military ordered the evacuation of the Zaytoun and Turkoman neighbourhoods on the southern edge of Gaza City, an indication that Palestinian militants are still putting up stiff resistance in areas of northern Gaza that the Israeli military said had been largely cleared weeks ago. *—AP*

UKRAINE PREMIER IN TOKYO SAYS HIS COUNTRY NEEDS MISSILES

TOKYO, 20 FEB

Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal said on Tuesday that his country needs long-range missiles and other ammunition to end Russia's invasion, and said he expects a US aid package that's stalled in Congress to come through, speaking at a news conference the day after he attended a conference in Tokyo on reconstructing Ukraine.

Ukraine has modern equipment, training soldiers and fighting at NATO standards and that "European countries and the United States are supporting us, absolutely," Shmyhal said. But, he said, the country needs more long-range missiles for air defense against Russia on the frontline, Shmyhal said. "Unfortunately, now they prevail in the air and unfortunately this leads to some consequences from the frontline, but I should say that we have no refuses from our partners to supply military equipment to Ukraine," he said.

The United States has provided Ukraine with about $111 billion, largely in weapons but also equipment and humanitarian assistance, and a new aid package of $95 billion is stalled in Congress after passing the Senate. *—AP*

PUTIN GIFTS LUXURY CAR TO KIM JONG UN

SEOUL, 20 FEB

Russian President Vladimir Putin has gifted North Korean leader Kim Jong Un a Russian-made car for his personal use in a demonstration of their special relationship, North Korea's state media reported Tuesday. The report didn't say what kind of vehicle it was or how it was shipped. But observers said it could violate a UN resolution that bans supplying luxury items to North Korea in an attempt to pressure the country to abandon its nuclear weapons.

Kim's sister, Kim Yo Jong, and another North Korean official accepted the gift Sunday and she conveyed her brother's thanks to Putin, the Korean Central News Agency said. *—AP*

PHOTO: PIXABAY

Gold slips Rs 100; silver slumps Rs 400

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

Gold slipped Rs 100 to Rs 62,700 per 10g in the national capital on Tuesday amid a fall in precious metal prices globally, according to HDFC Securities. The yellow metal had closed at Rs 62,800 per 10g in the previous trade. Silver also slumped Rs 400 to Rs 75,600 per kilogram, while it had settled at Rs 76,000 per kg in the previous close. "Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading at Rs 62,700 per 10 grams, down by Rs 100, taking a negative trend from overseas markets," Saumil Gandhi, senior analyst of commodities at HDFC Securities, said. *—PTI*

Rupee rises 6 paise to settle at 82.95 against US dollar

MUMBAI, 20 FEB

The rupee appreciated 6 paise to settle at 82.95 (provisional) against the US dollar on Tuesday, amid robust equity market sentiment and a weak American currency. Forex traders said, sustained outflow of foreign funds capped a sharp gain in the domestic currency. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.02 and touched the intraday high of 82.91 against the greenback. The local unit finally settled at 82.95 (provisional) against the dollar, registering a gain of 6 paise from its previous close. On Friday, the rupee settled 4 paise higher at 83.01 against the US dollar. The currency market was closed on Monday on account of Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Jayanti. Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst, LKP Securities, said the rupee strengthened as the dollar index weakened. The dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was 0.10 per cent lower at 104.07.*—PTI*

JSW Group elevates Kaustubh Kulkarni as head of banking

MUMBAI, 20 FEB

JSW Group on Tuesday said Kaustubh Kulkarni has been elevated to the post of Head of banking with immediate effect. Kulkarni joined the Group in 2017 as the group head of M&A and Strategic Financing, JSW Group said in a statement. "In addition to his existing responsibilities as Group Head of M&A and Strategic Financing, Kulkarni will now oversee banking relationships across the group business verticals," it said.JSW Group is into steel, energy, cement, infrastructure, paints, sports and venture capital. *—PTI*

Zee 'reaches out' to Sony to revive merger

Sony is allegedly evaluating the proposal from Zee

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

Zee Entertainment Enterprises Ltd (ZEEL) is seeking rapprochement with Sony Group as it makes a last-ditch effort to resurrect a USD 10 billion merger, according to industry sources.

After the Japanese multinational firm pulled the plug on its USD 10 billion merger deal in January, the Indian company reached out again to Sony to reconsider the termination and offered for talks this month, a source said. On the other hand, Sony is understood to be evaluating the proposal from Zee.

A Zee spokesperson said, "Since the matter is subjudice we have no comments to offer." The development comes amidst the two parties filing cases against each other after the deal collapsed.Sony had initiated arbitration proceedings before The Singapore Arbitration Center (SIAC) claiming around Rs 748.5 crore as a termination fee.

On the other hand, ZEEL filed a petition before the Mumbai bench of the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT), seeking a direction to Sony Group to implement the merger scheme. SIAC also denied Sony Group's plea seeking interim relief against ZEEL to restrain it from moving NCLT to enforce the failed merger of its subsidiary Culver Max with the Indian media house. ZEEL also initiated appropriate legal actions to contest the claims of Rs 748.5 crore filed by Sony Group before SIAC.

More than two years after announcing their proposed merger, Sony on January 22 announced the termination of the deal while accusing ZEEL of not meeting closing conditions even after extending their closing period by a month.

Overall Rs 250.73 crore were spent on the merger in the nine months of FY24 **PHOTO: PTI**

ZEEL has maintained that it was willing to meet most of the conditions.

Sources said during the one-month extension of the negotiation period, ZEEL had proposed an extension of a further six months for closing the transaction, even offering to discuss any other alternate closing timeline that Sony believed would be reasonable and achievable. ZEEL had also offered that its MD and CEO Punit Goenka would not lead the merged entity as per the condition. Earlier, the market watchdog SEBI had barred Essel Group chairman Subhash Chandra and Goenka from holding the position of a director in any listed company.

The market regulator took the action after they were allegedly found diverting funds from the company. However, this order was quashed by the Securities Appellate Tribunal (SAT). But the investigations against Goenka by SEBI (Securities and Exchange Board of India) are still pending. Last week, Sony's top management in its December quarter earnings said it will seek various options, including finding another opportunity to replace the plan and organic growth opportunities in India, which has great potential in the long term.

Overall Rs 250.73 crore were spent on the merger in the nine months of FY24. It had spent Rs 176.20 crore in FY23 for the deal, announced in December 2021. If the merger were completed, the combined entity would have owned over 70 TV channels, two video streaming services — ZEE5 and Sony LIV — and two film studios — Zee Studios and Sony Pictures Films India– making it the largest entertainment network in the country. *—PTI*

NIFTY SCALES FRESH HIGHS

IT pack continued to decline with TCS being the biggest loser among Sensex shares, dropping by 1.75 per cent. **PHOTO: PTI**

Stock markets extend winning run to 6th day,

MUMBAI, 20 FEB

Benchmark Sensex spurted by 349 points while Nifty scaled a fresh lifetime high on the sixth straight day of gains on Tuesday, driven by buying in banking and select FMCG shares.

The 30-share BSE Sensex reversed its early losses and closed higher by 349.24 points or 0.48 per cent at 73,057.40 in a volatile trade. As many as 18 Sensex shares closed in the green while 12 settled in the red.

The broader Nifty of the NSE rose further by 74.70 points or 0.34 per cent to close at a new record level of 22,196.95. Intra-day, the 50-share index touched lifetime high of 22,215.60.

The key indices opened lower but renewed buying in private lenders helped the barometers reverse losses and closed in the green for the sixth consecutive session. In six days, Nifty jumped 580 points while Sensex rallied 1,984 points.

"Amidst market volatility, the domestic market is once again poised to approach record highs. The latest upward trajectory is bolstered by gains in the banking sector, with private banks witnessing a rebound from a recent sharp correction," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said. Among Sensex gainers, Power Grid jumped the most by 4.16 per cent after its board approved an investment of Rs 656 crore in transmission projects. Private lenders HDFC Bank, Axis Bank, Kotak Bank, IndusInd Bank and ICICI Bank were also among lead gainers. NTPC, Nestle and Hindustan Unilever also ended the session with gains.

IT pack continued to decline with TCS being the biggest loser among Sensex shares, dropping by 1.75 per cent. *—PTI*

Paytm shares hit upper circuit for 3rd session

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

Shares of Paytm's parent firm One97 Communications rallied 5 per cent and touched upper circuit for the third straight session on Tuesday. According to reports, the Directorate of Enforcement (ED), which has been probing One97 Communications' arm Paytm Payments Bank Ltd (PPBL), has not found any breaches of the foreign exchange rules so far.

However, the reports said, the central agency has found certain lapses in know-your-customer (KYC) norms as well as issues around generation of suspicious transaction report.

Last week, ED had formally initiated a probe into overseas transactions by PPBL for allegedly flouting foreign exchange rules.

The scrip of crisis-hit fintech company surged 5 per cent each to Rs 376.45 and Rs 376.25 apiece -- its upper circuit limit -- on the BSE and NSE.

PHOTO: PTI

- On Monday, shares of One97 communications jumped 5 per cent, hitting its upper circuit, after the company announced its collaboration with Axis Bank.

The 30-share BSE Sensex benchmark gained 37.98 points or 0.05 per cent to 72,746.14, while NSE Nifty rose 3.05 points to 22,110.60.

On Monday, shares of One97 communications jumped 5 per cent, hitting its upper circuit, after the company announced its collaboration with Axis Bank for the continuation of merchant settlements.

The move will allow continuity of Paytm QR, soundbox and card machine after the March 15 deadline set by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) for shutting down operations of Paytm Payments Bank.

On Friday, shares of Paytm rose 5 per cent, rebounding after three days of fall amid the company coming under the regulatory scanner for various violations related to its payments bank business.

One97 Communication stock has taken a beating on the exchanges this month after the RBI action. *—PTI*

AMAZON DELIVERY IN U'KHAND VILLAGE AT 4,500 FT

CHANDIGARH, 20 FEB

E-commerce company Amazon on Tuesday said it has started delivery service in Gajoli, a remote village in Uttarkashi district of Uttarakhand.According to the company, it has become the first and only e-commerce company to deliver packages to Maharishi Ashram at Gajoli, situated at 4,500 feet in the Himalayan mountain range.

There are no shops or delivery options in and around the Ashram area. It is not only difficult but also time-consuming to deliver orders at this place, the company said.

"Over the few years, we have ramped up our infrastructure and delivery technology across all three miles, building a fast, safe, and resilient network to serve the varied needs of our customers," Karuna Pande, Director, Amazon Logistics, Amazon India, said. *—PTI*

Japan loans ₹12Kcr for 9 India projects

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

The finance ministry on Tuesday said that the Japanese government has committed a loan of about Rs 12,800 crore for nine projects related to various sectors in India.

The projects included North East Road Network Connectivity, Project for Promoting Start-up and Innovation in Telangana, Project for the Construction of Chennai Peripheral Ring Road, Project for Promoting Sustainable Horticulture in Haryana and Project for Climate Change Response and ecosystem Services Enhancement in Rajasthan.

The road network connectivity projects aim to improve infrastructure development in India's north-east region, while the Chennai peripheral ring road project aims to alleviate traffic congestion and strengthen connections to the southern part of the state, the finance ministry said in a statement.

The agreement to this effect was signed between Vikas Sheel, Additional Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs, and Suzuki Hiroshi, Ambassador of Japan to India.

"The project in Nagaland will help develop tertiary level medical service delivery by developing a medical college hospital contributing towards universal health coverage. A unique project in Telangana will help discover entrepreneurial skills with focus on women and rural population and support business expansion of MSMEs," it said.

The fifth tranche of the dedicated freight corridor project will help in construction of new dedicated freight railway system and bring about modernisation of intermodal logistics system enabling handling of increased freight traffic, it said.

India and Japan have had a long and fruitful history of bilateral development cooperation since 1958, it said.

Economic partnership, a key pillar of India-Japan relations, has steadily progressed in the last few years, it said, adding, exchange of notes for these important projects will further strengthen the strategic and global partnership between India and Japan. *—PTI*

WHIRLPOOL SHARES WORTH ₹4K SOLD ON BSE

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

More than 3.13 crore shares worth Rs 4,089.45 crore of home appliance maker Whirlpool of India sold on the BSE in the afternoon trade.

The company's shares were trading at Rs 1,303.10 apiece, down 2.08 per cent from the previous close.

The stock had touched its 52-week high of Rs 1,733 on December 12, 2023.

The promoter company, Whirlpool Mauritius, is likely to be the seller, divesting its stake in Whirlpool in its India subsidiary.

As on 31 December, 2023, Whirlpool Mauritius, a step-down arm of American home appliances major Whirlpool Corporation, held a 75 per cent stake in Whirlpool of India. The remaining 25 per cent is with public shareholding.

On 30 November last year, Whirlpool Corporation informed in a regulatory filing that it was planning to sell up to 24 per cent stake in Whirlpool of India in 2024 to raise funds and reduce its debt.

The filing was also shared on BSE by Whirlpool of India.

Gurugram-based Whirlpool of India, one of the leading home appliances firms, operates three manufacturing facilities at Faridabad, Puducherry and Pune. *—PTI*

AMSL sets up ₹210 cr unit in Telangana

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

Infrastructure and defence solutions provider, AMSL, on Tuesday said it has planned to establish a new facility in Telangana at Rs 210 crore.

The foundation stone laying ceremony for the facility, named IPiDS (Integrated Plant for Ingenious Defence Systems) was performed on Monday by Telangana Minister for Industries and Commerce and Legislative Affairs Duddilla Sridhar Babu Garu, the company said in a statement.

The manufacturing facility shall be built on around 5 acres of land with a total built-up area of 3,50,000 square feet with end-to-end manufacturing and qualification set-up as per international standards with a total investment of Rs 210 crore, according to the statement. "The company intends to manufacture missiles and its sub-systems and also undertake MRO of the weapons in this facility. The company is also working closely to manufacture unmanned aerial systems," it said. *—PTI*

Renault, BLS tie up for sales in rural market

CHENNAI, 20 FEB

Automaker Renault India on Tuesday said it has partnered with technology-enabled digital service provider BLS E-Services to enhance availability and accessibility of its vehicles in rural India. The two partners have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for enhancing the reach of Renault's 2024 range of Kwid, Triber and Kiger in the rural market, the company said in a statement. Under the collaboration, Renault India will leverage BLS E-Services' widespread network of approximately 1 lakh touchpoints, along with 1,016 digital stores to drive awareness and facilitate sales of Renault cars in rural and semi-urban regions across the country, it added. "Rural India holds great potential for us, and through our collaboration with BLS E-Services, we aspire to deepen our presence in these markets by introducing our made-in-India, made for the world cars that are designed to cater the unique preferences of our customers," Renault India Vice President of Sales and Marketing Sudhir Malhotra said. *—PTI*

Mahindra gets 100% stake in Orchid Services

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

IT services company Tech Mahindra on Tuesday announced the acquisition of 100 per cent stake in Orchid Cybertech Services through its wholly-owned subsidiary for USD 3.27 million (over Rs 27 crore) in an all-cash deal.

Orchid Cybertech Services (OCSI) provides customer experience-related services to TPG Telecom. It has about 2,950 full-time employees. The turnover of OCSI for the financial year ended on July 31, 2023, was USD 37.3 million. It further pegged the cost of acquisition at over Rs 27 crore.

OCSI was incorporated on 15 October, 2004, in the Philippines, the BSE filing said.

Separately, Tech Mahindra has announced a strategic partnership with TOTSCo (The One Touch Switching Company Ltd) to design, build and operate a message exchange platform for the UK telecom industry.The platform will be used by all UK retail communications service providers to enable the new one-touch switch process for fixed broadband. *—PTI*

ZOOMCAR, SPARKCARS SIGN TIE UP

BENGALURU, 20 FEB

Car sharing marketplace Zoomcar on Tuesday said it has partnered with electric vehicles self-drive rental firm SPARKCARS with a plan to introduce over 1,000 EVs on its platform across India within the next two years.

The partnership will help increase the supply of EV cars available for self-drive to meet the growing needs of convenient and independent travel, the company said in a statement.

Zoomcar CEO and Co-Founder Greg Moran said the partnership follows the direction of the government's growing focus on boosting the EV ecosystem. *—PTI*

BLENDED FINANCE FACILITY

Goa, World Bank collaborate

PANAJI, 20 FEB

Goa government on Tuesday announced setting up of a blended finance facility in partnership with the World Bank that will enable the coastal state to access and mobilise concessional finance to implement low-carbon and climate-resilient investments.

Chief Minister Pramod Sawant in presence of the World Bank officials and other institutions announced the setting up of the facility. The blended finance facility was announced at the 2024 edition of the World Bank's India Climate and Development Partners' Meet, an annual conference of thought leaders and changemakers in the climate sector.

PHOTO: PTI

The conference is being held in Panaji from 19 to 21 February. *—PTI*

Waaree bags solar project worth Rs 991 crore

BENGALURU, 20 FEB

Waaree Renewable Technologies on Tuesday said it bagged an order worth Rs 990.60 crore for a 980 MWp solar project.

The new order came from one of the leading renewable energy companies in India.

Waaree Renewable Technologies Ltd (Waaree RTL) said in a stock exchange filing.

Waaree RTL received a "letter of award (LOA) for the execution of engineering, procurement and construction (EPC) work for solar power plant of 980 MWp on turnkey basis", it said, adding the company's unexecuted order book now stands at 2.141 GW.

The project is scheduled to be completed within 12 months as per the LOA. *—PTI*

TO CHECK PRICES

Onion export ban to continue till 31 Mar: Govt

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

The ban on export of onion will continue till its previously announced deadline of 31 March as the government is keen to keep prices under check and ensure domestic availability, a top official said on Tuesday.

On 8 December, 2023, the government had banned export of onion till 31 March.

"Ban on onion exports has not been lifted. It is in force and there is no change in the status," Consumer Affairs Secretary Rohit Kumar Singh told PTI.

The government's supreme priority is to ensure enough domestic availability of onion at reasonable prices to consumers, he added.

On reports of lifting of the export ban on the commodity, the modal wholesale onion prices shot up 40.62 per cent to Rs 1,800 per quintal on 19 February in Lasalgoan, the country's largest wholesale onion market, from Rs 1,280 per quintal on 17 February.

On 8 December, 2023, the government had banned export of onion till 31 March **PHOTO:PIXABAY**

Ahead of general elections, the ban is unlikely to be lifted even after 31 March as rabi (winter) onion production is expected to be lower due to less coverage of area especially in Maharasthra, sources said.

In the 2023 rabi season, onion production was estimated to be at 22.7 million tonnes.

The Agriculture Ministry officials will assess the rabi onion coverage in key growing states of Maharsthra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat in the coming days. *—PTI*

IPL is set to begin on 22nd March: Arun Dhumal

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

The much-anticipated Indian Premier League is set to begin on 22 March and will be held entirely in the country despite the coinciding general elections, league chairman Arun Dhumal told PTI on Tuesday.

The elections are expected to be held in April and May and that is the main reason why the schedule for the IPL's 17th edition has not been unveiled yet.

Speaking to PTI, Dhumal said to begin with, only the schedule of the first 15 days will be announced and the roster for the remaining games will be decided after the announcement of the general election dates.

The dates of the Lok Sabha polls are expected to be announced early next month.

"We are looking at a 22 March start for the tournament. We are working closely with the government agencies and we will first release the initial schedule. The entire tournament will be held in India," said Dhumal.

Only in 2009, the IPL, in its entirety, was held overseas (South Africa) while the 2014 edition was partially held in the UAE due to the general elections.

However, in 2019, the tournament was held in India despite the elections.

Considering the T20 World Cup begins within days of the cash-rich league's conclusion, the final is likely to be held on 26 May.

India will play their opening World Cup fixture against Ireland in New York on 5 June while the ICC showpiece begins with the USA and Canada clash on 1 June.

As is the norm, the IPL opener will be played between last year's finalists, the winners Chennai Super Kings in this case, and runners-up Gujarat Titans.

The players' auction for the 2024 season was held in December last year and Australian pacer Mitchell Starc became the most expensive player in the history of the league after being bought by Kolkata Knight Riders for Rs 24.75 crore. *—PTI*

The much-anticipated Indian Premier League is set to begin on 22 March **PHOTO: PTI**

PHOTO: IANS

Norrie moves into second round of Rio Open

RIO DE JANEIRO, 20 FEB

Cameron Norrie started his defense of the Rio Open title by beating Bolivia's Hugo Dellien 6-3, 6-2 on Monday.

"This is a special place for me, I won my biggest title last year here," Norrie said. "I have another chance to work on my game and maybe enjoy the beach a little."Norrie upset Carlos Alcaraz in the 2023 final and both are seeded to make the final again.

The second-seeded Norrie will face Chile's Tomás Barrios Vera next.

Also, fourth-seeded player Francisco Cerúndolo of Argentina won.

Alcaraz will play his opener on Tuesday against home crowd hope Thiago Monteiro and three-time major winner Stan Wawrinka will take on Argentina's Facundo Díaz Acosta, fresh from winning the Argentina Open on Sunday as a wild card.*—AP*

PHOTO: IANS

Napoli fires coach Mazzarri and hires Calzona

NAPLES, 20 FEB

Still struggling in Serie A, defending champion Napoli made its second coaching change of the season just two days before facing Barcelona in the Champions League.

Napoli fired Walter Mazzarri after training on Monday and appointed Slovakia coach Francesco Calzona, who was the former assistant at the Serie A team but has never managed at club level.

Mazzarri replaced Rudi Garcia only in November and Napoli, which is emerging as one of the worst defending champions in the history of the Italian league.*—AP*

PHOTO: IANS

German football great Brehme is dead at 63

LONDON, 20 FEB

Andreas Brehme, whose 85th-minute penalty sealed victory for West Germany over Argentina in the 1990 World Cup final, died overnight into Tuesday at the age of 63, his former club Bayern Munich said."FC Bayern is deeply shocked by the sudden death of Andreas Brehme," the club said in a statement."We will always keep Andreas Brehme in our hearts. *—AP*

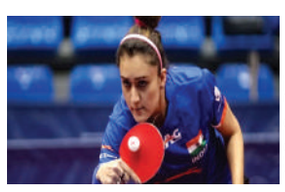


PHOTO: PTI

Indian women progress to the knock-out phase

BUSAN, 20 FEB

The Indian women's team came from behind to beat Spain 3-2 in its final group game and progressed to the knock-out phase of the World Table Tennis Team Championships here on Tuesday.India, the stronger team on paper, was pushed against the wall but found a way to scrape past the Spaniards after Sreeja Akula and Manika Batra lost the first two singles of the tie.After Ayhika Mukherjee kept India in the contest with a win in the third singles, Manika and Sreeja returned to get the job done in the fourth and fifth singles.*—AP*

Chappell urges Root to play his natural game and drop Bazball

Jaiswal has learned from his upbringing and not from Bazball: Nasser

LONDON, 20 FEB

Former Australia captain Ian Chappell has urged out-of-form England batter Joe Root to shun the 'Bazball' approach and get back to playing his natural game.

Senior batter Root has struggled for runs in the ongoing five-match series against India, registering a set of low scores across six innings.

Keeping up with England's aggressive Bazball approach, Root has mostly lost his wicket playing outlandish shots in India.

"Root had a bloody fine record playing normally, and he was a quick scorer playing normally," Chappell told 'Wide World of Sports', describing Bazball as "bullshit".

"I don't see why he's trying to change things drastically, and I've never believed you should play premeditated shots," Chappell added.

Ian Chappell **PHOTO: ANI**

Root, who has over 11,000 Test runs, copped up a lot of criticism for his dismissal in England's first innings in the third Test, as he attempted to reverse sweep Jasprit Bumrah but only ended up edging to slip.

His dismissal led to a batting collapse. England were 224/2 when Root got out. The tourists then lost eight wickets for 95 runs to be bowled out for 319, handing India a 126-run first-innings lead.

J Root **PHOTO: ANI**

England eventually lost the Test by a mammoth 434 runs, their largest defeat in terms of runs since 1934.

Chapell argued that while a top-order batter must look to score aggressively, the players must adjust according to the match situation.

"You can't always do it it's got to be according to the conditions and also who's bowling," he said.

Bumrah has dismissed Root on nine occasions in Test cricket now.

"Some bowlers you can

Yashasvi Jaiswal **PHOTO: PTI**

score off a lot quicker than others, but when a really good bowler is bowling a good spell, you've got to be prepared to try and battle it out and think to yourself 'Well, when he goes off, it'll get a bit easier'."You're always trying to score runs that's got to be your prime aim. But, you've also got to realize in some conditions, against some bowlers you can score quicker than others."

Former captain **Nasser Hussain** has lashed out at

Nasser Hussain **PHOTO: ANI**

Ben Duckett for suggesting that Yashasvi Jaiswal's aggressive batting in the Rajkot Test was influenced by England's 'Bazball' strategy, saying it is the visitors who need to learn from the young Indian sensation.

At the end of the third day's play in Rajkot, Duckett had praised Jaiswal for his attacking century and suggested that the current England team should receive credit for influencing teams to bat more aggressively in Tests. *—AP*

England captain Ben Stokes **PHOTO: TWITTER**

Will Ben bowl against India in the fourth Test?

RAJKOT, 20 FEB

Back-to-back heavy defeats against India have compelled England captain Ben Stokes to consider an early return to bowling with head coach Brendon McCullum admitting that although it's a good sign, they don't want the all-rounder to push himself unnecessarily.

Stokes, who is still recovering from a knee surgery, hasn't bowled since the second Ashes Test in June last year.

"Well, it's good that he's getting into a state where he thinks he might bowl," McCullum was quoted as saying by ESPNCricinfo on Monday.

"But Ben is clever; he's clever as well. He won't bowl unless he thinks he's legitimately able to bowl. The problem would be if he starts getting into a spell and then he can't get out of the spell. So we'll see what unfolds.

"If he does get that bit between his teeth, then let's see where the danger lies there and try and pull him away from it. But it's a good sign," McCullum added.

Ahead of the Rajkot Test, Stokes had said he "pinky promised" his physiotherapist he wouldn't be bowling in the ongoing series.

But when asked if he will be reprising his all-rounder's role after the 434-run defeat in the third Test on Sunday, Stokes said, "I'm not saying yes, I'm not saying no".

"Me being me, I'm always very optimistic about most things. That will be a more detailed chat with the medical team about what workload I have done to pass me off as not being a massive risk."

During the Rajkot Test, Stokes had even trained at 100 percent intensity and conceded that he felt pretty good. *—PTI*

Rishabh Pant **PHOTO: PTI**

Pant is on course for a comeback

BENGALURU, 20 FEB

Rishabh Pant remains on course for a much-anticipated comeback in the IPL after taking part in a practice game organized by his franchise Delhi Capitals in Alur, Karnataka.

Pant, who met with a horrific car accident in December 2022, has been undergoing rehabilitation at the National Cricket Academy and is working hard to regain match fitness before the start of the IPL in the second half of March.

The southpaw had also featured in an exhibition game last year.

"The match was part of assessing his mobility. He has been batting at nets for a while and playing in a practice game was more like an extension of it," said an NCA source referring to the intra-squad game in Alur near Bengaluru.

Earlier this month, Delhi Capitals head coach Ricky Ponting had given a major update on Pant, saying the game-changing cricketer was confident about his return to the IPL. However, Pant may not be ready for wicketkeeping duties in the competition, as suggested by Ponting at an event in Melbourne.

"Rishabh is very confident that he's going to be right to play. In what capacity we're not quite sure yet," Ponting had said. *—PTI*

SABALENKA FALLS TO OLD FOE VEKIC IN DUBAI'S SECOND ROUND

DUBAI, 20 FEB

Aryna Sabalenka **PHOTO: ANI**

Aryna Sabalenka lost her first match since successfully defending her Australian Open title when she was overhauled by an old foe at the Dubai Championships on Tuesday. The No. 2-ranked Sabalenka blew a set and 2-0 lead as Donna Vekic of Croatia rallied to win 6-7 (5), 6-3, 6-0 in the second round.They go back eight years, and Vekic dominated the early matchups. But Sabalenka made the Grand Slam breakthrough when she beat Vekic in the Australian quarterfinals a year ago en route to her first major title.Vekic referenced Sabalenka winning "the big one" of their career matchups on Tuesday but her sixth win in their eight contests wasn't too shabby either.Sabalenka led 5-3 before settling the first set in a tiebreaker. Sabalenka, coming off a three-week layoff after her Melbourne triumph, then led 2-0 with a point for 3-0. *—AP*

KOHLI WELCOMES 2ND CHILD

NEW DELHI, 20 FEB

Star India batter Virat Kohli on Tuesday announced that he and his actress wife Anushka Sharma were blessed with a baby boy on 15 February.

—PTI

Gulveer Singh loses 3000m gold

TEHRAN, 20 FEB

India's Gulveer Singh lost his men's 3000m gold medal in the Asian Indoor Athletics Championships here after he was disqualified for 'lane infringement'.

Gulveer had clocked 8 minutes 07.48 seconds to finish on top of the podium in the 3000m final, a non-Olympic athletics event, late on Monday.

He was later disqualified for lane infringement and a late-night 'appeal' by the Athletics Federation of India (AFI) was also rejected.

"Yes, it was ruled that Gulveer committed lane infringement. *—AP*

Nagal, Ramkumar advance to pre-quarterfinals in Pune ATP

BENGALURU, 20 FEB

Top-seeded Sumit Nagal and wildcard Ramkumar Ramanathan on Tuesday entered the pre-quarterfinals of the ATP Challenger 100 international tournament after winning their respective round of 32 matches here on Tuesday.

Nagal defeated Chinese Taipei's Yu Hsiou Hsu 7(6)-6, 6-4 at the center court at the Mhalunge Balewadi Tennis Stadium.

Nagal, who won the ATP Challenger in Chennai and reached the semifinals in Bengaluru, came back from a breakdown in the second set to record his win in two hours and five minutes.

On the other hand, in a thrilling contest that lasted one hour and 55 minutes, Ramanathan scored a 7-6(5) 7-6(5) win over 160th-ranked Stefano Napolitano, who won the Bengaluru Open last week.

The 101-ranked Nagal will now take on compatriot Niki Kaliyanda Poonacha for a spot in the quarterfinals, while Ramanathan will lock horns with Russia's Alexy Zakahrov.

Also moving to the round of 16 was Australia's Adam Walton, who recorded a 7-6 (1), 6-2 win over Belgian qualifier Raphael Collignon.

Sumit Nagal **PHOTO: PTI**

The fourth seed Monaco's Valentin Vacherot defeated the former world No. 25, Vasek Pospisil 6-3, 7-5.

South Korea's Seongchan Hong, a finalist in the Bengaluru Open, lost to Poland's Maks Kasnikowski 4-6, 2-6. Oriol Roca Batalla, a semi-finalist last week, was knocked out by USA's Tristian Boyer 2-6, 6-4, 2-6.

In the doubles, Indian wildcards Siddhant Banthia and Parikshit Somani advanced to the quarterfinals with a 5-7, 7-6 (5), 10-5 win over Luca Margaroli and Goncalo Oliveira.

But the fourth seeds Sriram Balaji and Andre Begemann were beaten by Japan's Toshihide Matsui/ Kaito Uesugi 4-6, 7-6 (5), 10-5. *—PTI*

'WANT TO FINISH ON A HIGH'

Lewis Hamilton ahead of final season with Mercedes

ROME, 20 FEB

The seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton has called it "the greatest honor" if he could assist Mercedes to return to the top of Formula One in his final season with the Silver Arrows before joining Ferrari. Hamilton stunned the F1 world at the beginning of this month when he announced that he would be leaving Mercedes after the season to join the Italian team for the 2025 Formula One season on a multi-year contract.

"I feel the most motivated and focused I've ever been. I mean every year you come back and you're like 'I'm fitter than ever' and all these different things but I genuinely feel I've put more work and more time and more focus into preparation this year," Hamilton said in an interview released by Mercedes from their Silverstone car launch as quoted by Sky Sports. "I never thought that at this point in my life that I would have hunger like I do right now and to finish on a high with this team, it would be a dream," he added.

"We've gone through a whole heap together so to finish on a high it would be the greatest honour to be able to help them to get back to the top," said the seven-time world champion.

Lewis Hamilton **PHOTO: TWITTER**

- The seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton has called it "the greatest honor" if he could assist Mercedes to return to the top of Formula One in his final season with the Silver Arrows before joining Ferrari.

Hamilton and Mercedes have secured their positions in history during an incredible association since the British driver joined the team from McLaren in 2013, with the 39-year-old becoming statistically the most successful driver of all time.

Earlier, the legendary Formula One driver said that it has been a crazy few days for him, opening up about his shocking move for the first time since announcing the switch.

Taking to X, Hamilton said that 11 years with Mercedes will come to an end in 2025, as he is looking forward to starting a new journey with the Ferrari.

"It's been a crazy few days which have been filled with a whole range of emotions. But as you all now know, after an incredible 11 years at Mercedes-AMG PETRONAS F1 Team, the time has come for me to start a new chapter in my life and I will be joining Scuderia Ferrari in 2025," Hamilton wrote on X.

The British driver said that driving in red for Scuderia Ferrari has been his "childhood dream".

"I feel incredibly fortunate, after achieving things with Mercedes that I could only have dreamed of as a kid, that I now have the chance to fulfill another childhood dream. Driving in Ferrari red..."

"Mercedes has been a huge part of my life since I was 13 years old, so this decision has been the hardest I've ever had to make. I'm incredibly proud of all that we've achieved together and I'm very grateful for the hard work and dedication of everyone I have worked with over the years and of course Toto, for his friendship, guidance, and leadership. *—AP*